

# JOURNAL OF PRISON EDUCATION & REENTRY

Vol 3

No 1

June 2016

*Dialogue for researchers & practitioners*

*Artwork courtesy of CSUSB  
Community-based Art at the  
California Institution for Men*

## Editor's Welcome

by

ARVE ASBJØRNSEN

Lead Editor, University of Bergen, Norway

Dear JPER reader:

We are now in our third volume since the inauguration and launching of the journal web site in October, 2014. For the three issues that are out so far, 31 research papers, practitioners' papers, and feature articles have been published. We've seen an even increase in submissions of both research papers and practitioner's papers; Even though submissions usually require revisions before they can be published, mainly the submissions we receive are of good quality, and they cover important issues for education in prisons. And they are well received. On the average, each contribution has been approached nearly 350 times, and has been downloaded as pdf-files approximately 180 times. Whether this is good or bad is hard to know. Approximately 520 people are following the EPEA page on Facebook, and 952 likes on the Correctional Education Association's Facebook page. Should we message these organizations when we publish new material in JPER? Is there anything else we can do to catch the attention of people involved in the education of prisoners? Please share your thoughts with us, either through mail, or preferably on our Facebook page.

We are very satisfied with the access we have to much great artwork created in prisons across the world. These works are inspiring, and remind us of the potential and the creativity we are surrounded by. We treasure the fact that we can use these works on the cover of our journal.

We started the journal with a rolling publishing schedule, as the articles are available on the internet as soon as the contributions are ready through the editorial process. It is our belief that it is important for the researchers, and also for the continuing debate of best practice, that there should be no delay in the publication of new ideas and new research findings. Online publication allows for this, and it is common practice in online publishing. It is also one of the true benefits over the printed journals. More established scholarly journals give access to electronic preprint versions; printing time delays the ongoing discussions, and short turnover is crucial for a research environment. However, will a complete issue published twice a year be more appealing to our readers? Please share your thoughts with us by mail, or even better, use our Facebook page for this.

In the last completed issue (Vol 2, Issue 2) we brought you two research articles and four practitioner's papers. The first research article was authored by [Dorian Brosens and her colleagues](#) in Belgium. They reported from a research project on barriers to participation in vocational training for incarcerated males. They identified among other factors the importance of language barriers and frequency of visitors from the outside for foreign prisoners' participation in vocational education.

The second paper, authored by [Lee A. Underwood and colleagues](#), reported preliminary data from the *Louisiana Sex Offender Treatment Program*. The program includes pedagogical models that should be of general interest for the readers of JPER, in addition to the documentation of more specific psycho-educational effects of the particular program.

Both articles give important contributions to the discussion of best practices in prison education and the reentry process, and will hopefully inspire further challenging discussions on these important matters.

We published three practitioner's papers discussing good practice in prison education. The first paper, by [Catherine Byrne](#) discussed initiatives piloted by maths teachers and school management to increase attendance,



engagement and certification in maths in Irish prisoners. The second paper, authored by [Monika Schumacher](#), showed the perspective of a teacher reflecting on beliefs and assumptions regarding professional issues in the specific learning setting of teaching German as a second language to foreign prisoners. She advocated that teachers believe in incarcerated persons' capability to learn and achieve. This article is our first attempt to also publish material in the author's primary language, so the article is also published in [German](#). If this bilingual practice is a success, we will follow up on this practice. The third paper, authored by [Em Strang](#), discussed a project with long-term prisoners at HMP Dumfries in Scotland. Tutors and students explored the notion and application of 'compassion', focusing in particular on the ways in which understanding compassion enables learning – not just the learning of academic subjects but also of interpersonal skills and emotional intelligence. The benefit of teaching compassion was documented through written and verbal student feedback. Three short workshops highlighted the potential in developing and establishing compassion as both subject and practice in prison education.

This concludes Volume 2, issue 2, and you should now be able to download the issue as a full pdf document for your convenience.

The Volume 3 will bring you more new and hopefully inspiring thoughts and ideas for your continuing work in prison education and reentry. We start out by reviewing a book on adult education across European countries authored by Paul Downes. The book is available online, but Paul has also produced a precis of the book for us, covering the information that is most relevant for the work in prison education.

We will continue to bring you the little historical vignettes. So far, we have relied on Thom Ghering at the University of California, San Bernardino to produce these for us. Naturally, his vignettes are mainly covering elements in the history of prison education in the US. I am sure there are historical persons and events also in other part of the world that are worth remembering. Please help us out with anecdotes and historical sketches from *your* country!

## About the cover art:

Collaborative Mural (detail), CSUSB Community-based Art at the California Institution for Men, 45' x 8', created by 30 participants (inmates) and 5 teaching artists (students), 2014-15.

Photo credit: Andrew K Thompson

Community-based art is an approach to making, teaching, and learning art that directly engages community. Since 2013, California State University San Bernardino (CSUSB) Community-based Art (CBA) has partnered with sites in the Inland Empire that don't otherwise have access to art, facilitating ongoing classes and workshops in visual art, art history, and creative writing to individuals in three CA state prisons as well as the CSUSB Reentry Initiative, County Probation, a public housing project, youth shelters, and low-income senior housing. Our community partners have an expressed interest in bringing art to their programs and our classes are based on a philosophy of collaboration, interdependence, and mutual learning.



## Englishman Matthew Davenport Hill on an Anomalous Pro-Prison Reform Period in Britain

by THOM GEHRING  
California State University, San Bernardino

For centuries, the English resisted spending tax money on prisons. As a result, North America was populated largely by transported persons who were in contact, or at risk of being in contact, with England's criminal justice system. After the American Revolution, when that cost cutting strategy failed, the English developed a system of "hulks"—large old ships, no longer seaworthy, were chained to the docks and subdivided into prison cells. But by 1787 the English realized that they could transport their felons to Australia, and a new period of convict transportation began. Eventually that system failed, too. Large numbers of difficult to manage Irish political prisoners arrived at the "down under" penal colonies and the free Australian colonists closed their doors to transported felons, just as the Americans had done earlier.

And then something very unusual happened back in England. Perhaps the most concise expression of this new awareness can be found in the January 3, 1857 edition of the *Spectator*. "Where shall we put our felons?.... extraneous circumstances [have] compelled Ministers [of government] to abandon convict transportation.... We are about to feel the consequences... in a grand recruitment of our certificated criminals; and we may well press the alarming question—What to do with our felons?.... civilized nations object to being colonized by aliens, more especially by [our] felons..." (Hill, M.D., [1975/1857], *Suggestions for the Repression of Crime*, [1975/1857]. Montclair, NJ: Patterson Smith, pp. 638-639). The result was that, for a brief period the English focused on forming and reforming prisons in their own nation rather than transporting them to the ends of the earth.

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## Making the Case for Prison Education in a Lifelong Learning Society

### Access to Education in Europe: A Framework and Agenda for System Change

by Paul Downes

London: Springer

Reviewed by CORMAC BEHAN

In *Access to Education in Europe: A Framework and Agenda for System Change*, Paul Downes examines the barriers to accessing education using reports from 12 different countries in Europe, ranging from Ireland to Russia and from Scotland to Slovenia. It covers a wide variety of subjects, from conceptual frameworks, to a macro-level analysis of barriers preventing individuals accessing education. The study is part of the European Commission Sixth Framework Project, *Towards a lifelong learning society: The contribution of the education system*.

At first glance, it may sound like, and could have been a dry analysis of various reports. But it is nothing of the sort. The book draws on Downes' research interests in psychology, education, law, philosophy and social policy and offers a very readable and challenging critique of the barriers to accessing education in Europe that will be of particular interest to educators in prison worldwide.

The central focus of this study", according to Downes, "is on socio-economic disadvantage, social inclusion, social exclusion and social class with respect to increased access to education opportunities" (p.5). As research in education has tended to neglect a systemic approach, the key purpose is to "develop a system level scrutiny to promote access to higher education and lifelong learning for socio-economically excluded groups in Europe" (p. 2). It examines why some groups are disproportionately put off from participating in education. Some of these deterrents are situational – beyond the control of the individual; dispositional – those based on personal attitudes or dispositions towards education; and institutional – red tape and procedural problems with registration, and scheduling or location problems.

In developing an agenda for social inclusion, this study interrogates the system of access to higher education, non-formal education and prison education. It argues for a "phasing out of language such as 'educational disadvantage' and the term 'disadvantaged'" because it is "negative labelling, offering a pejorative, deficit model of working class communities" (p.11).

Of particular interest to those working in prison education are two chapters (10 and 11) examining indicators at macro-exo and micro-meso levels. However, as prison education in Europe is based on adult education principles set out in the Council of Europe document *Education in Prison* (1990) there is much else that will interest those who teach and learn behind bars.

Downes outlines some of the challenges in accessing education in prison which will be familiar to prison educators. These barriers vary across countries and indeed jurisdictions, but if one were to generalise, it is safe to say that the barriers to prisoners accessing education are considerable. He begins by setting out the European policy on life-long learning and prison education and then asks if there are adequate strategies at national level to facilitate education in prison. Downes emphasises that there must be sufficient funding so that strategies do not exist merely on paper and concludes that it is "evident from a number of national reports that prison education is completely lacking in strategic focus and intervention at national level in some countries" (p.202).



There are a number of challenges unique to education in prison, including access to the internet; high turn-over in classes, especially in remand centres where prisoners might only spend a short period of time; transfer of prisoners during educational programmes; education of long-term prisoners and attitudes of prison staff and management, all of which can facilitate or stymie educational opportunities.

Other challenges facing education in prison is the attempt to redefine education in some jurisdictions as training. Adult education is much more than merely the acquisition of skills or the accumulation of knowledge (although these are valid objectives in their own right). In England, for example, while there is a national strategic plan to allow access for prisoners to education, “it nevertheless remains a concern that the goal of employment subordinates other legitimate goals of lifelong learning - such as active citizenship, social cohesion and personal fulfilment” (p.196).

Access to the internet for prisoners remains an issue in many jurisdictions and there is an urgent need for internet access to remove barriers to digital literacy. As one prison educator in Ireland remarked: “I personally think there shouldn’t be any obstacles because...it’s a literacy...digitally literacy...it’s essential”. (p.198). Downes rightly concludes that this is not merely about access to the internet, “what is being presented as a technological problem is de facto more a lack of political will to access the appropriate technology for this limited external communication” (p. 199).

Downes examines a number of indicators of barriers to access in prison education which will be familiar to prison educators internationally. These include structural indicators, such as whether prison education is based on a principle of normality which is a rights-based approach that operates in Norway, for example. Another structural indicator is the utilisation of individual learning plans for students in prison. This is not always as clear cut as may seem at first glance and locating prison education in the adult education environment, Downes argues that it is “important to emphasise that an individual education plan needs to be a democratic process operating against a backdrop of good relations between the prisoner and the tutor” (pp. 207-208). There are a variety of initial assessment approaches but whatever one is used it must treat prison learners as adults. The approach “must be part of a wider relational strategy to engage prisoners in education” and must be a “dialogical approach rather than a social control” method (p.209). Prisoners, like adults on the outside, engage in education for a variety of reasons, some to learn a skill, others to reflect on their lives and some out of boredom. Some to use their time inside to undertake a more transformational process and education can be central to that. Therefore, one size will not, and indeed should not, fit all.

In a number of jurisdictions prison educators and learners lack adequate or appropriate space to undertake learning and teaching. Reflecting the sometimes chaotic natures of prison regimes, education can take place at various times and different places. Some classes/courses are peer to peer, others have education on wings and others still have centralised classrooms in a designated education centre. Downes recognises the importance of a separate educational site, while recognising that a wing-based model in addition to a central school also has advantages. Another challenge is how to build on the good work and motivation of prisoners inside when they are released into the community and he therefore argues that shorter, more focussed, intensive course may be more appropriate for students in prison. This builds on the adult education philosophy of a student-centred approach that meets the needs of learners where they are at in their learning journey

Downes concludes his analysis of prison education arguing for a rights-based approach to access education; a variety of initial assessment approaches to identify a prisoner’s individual learning difficulties, strengths and needs; professional development of prison teachers and peer supports for education. While this review does not have the space to do justice to the breadth and depth of research in this book, there are many other areas that will be of interest to readers of JPER. Prison education has always contributed in an innovative way to the development of methodologies, strategies and resources in adult education. This book while setting out the barriers also calls for a reframing of our approach to eliminate these barriers to education. It is a rigorous analysis using structural indicators to critique social exclusion and remind us of the arguments in favour of life-long learning beyond mere economic advancement. These include building engaged and resilient communities and networks of change that can strive to eliminate

not just the barriers to education, but also seek to reduce and eliminate social exclusion, marginalisation and build a fairer and more just society.

The data indicating the obstacles to education are set out in this book. While Downes acknowledges that “such indicators are not a sufficient condition to open doors for access to higher education and lifelong learning for socio-economically marginalised groups in Europe” he argues that “nevertheless such an agenda of indicators is a key condition for this opening to come to pass” (p.247). Downes has done a superb job nudging the door open by developing a framework and agenda for change. It is now time for action.

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## **Access to Education for Prisoners in Europe: An Agenda of Structural Indicators for System Change**

Précis of Downes, P. (2014) *Access to Education in Europe: A Framework and Agenda for System Change*. Lifelong Learning Book Series, Series Editors: Aspin, David N., Chapman, Judith D. Dordrecht, Springer Verlag. Foreword by Sue Waddington, President, European Adult Education Association (EAEA) (2008-2013).

### **Introduction**

The key purpose of this book is to develop a system level scrutiny to promote access to higher education and lifelong learning for socio-economically excluded groups in Europe, including prisoners. The scope of the research findings presented in this book is based on national reports, completed in 2010, from Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, England, Estonia, Hungary, Ireland, Lithuania, Norway, Russia, Scotland and Slovenia, as part of the European Commission Sixth Framework Project, *Towards a lifelong learning society*. Across the 12 national reports, 196 in-depth, semi-structured, interviews took place in total with members of senior management from 83 education institutions, as well as from senior officials in government departments relevant to lifelong learning in each country. The access to education in prison section of the book is based on 28 interviews with senior prison officials and with prison tutors or education organisers in each of the 14 prison institutions across the participating countries.

This research is qualitative in focus. Caution must be taken in generalising the responses from the interviewed institutional representatives to other institutions in the same country and beyond. The findings across the participating countries are intended to be illustrative of relevant issues and practices regarding access to education for prisoners rather than being exhaustive. A particular focus in this book is on Central and Eastern European contexts.

An encouraging and significant step forward that has taken place at European Union level occurs in the EU *Council Resolution on a renewed European agenda for adult learning* ( 2011 ) document—under the ‘Promoting equity, social cohesion and active citizenship through adult learning’ heading, in its Annex. This is the invitation for Member States to focus on:

‘Addressing the learning needs of...people in specific situations of exclusion from learning, such as those in...prisons, and providing them with adequate guidance support’ (C 372/6).

This is the first EU Council Resolution in the area of lifelong learning to explicitly embrace prisoners within its scope of relevant target groups, via a social cohesion and active citizenship lens.

Particular focus for current purposes is on structural indicators for system level scrutiny of access to education and lifelong learning in prison by analogy with the UN right to health framework but not contingent upon it. These structural indicators are factual and verifiable in a given setting. They offer a kind of X-ray into key features of a system. Structural indicators can operate at different system levels such as individual institution, local, regional, national, EU and UN levels. A number of such structural indicators have been developed in a systems approach for early school leaving prevention (Downes 2013). Structural indicators can offer transparency not only for comparative purposes but also with regard to self-assessment on progress over time.



The focus with structural indicators is on relatively enduring features (structures/ mechanisms/guiding principles) of a system, features that are, however, potentially malleable. For a State to assert the presence of any given structural indicator, generally framed as a yes/no question, evidence may need to be furnished to validate this assertion. The detail of such evidence may depend on the kind of specific structural indicator and may require different levels of detail for different structural indicators.

The level of detail may also depend on the form of the reporting process. Structural indicators can operate at different system levels such as individual institution, local, regional, national, EU and UN levels. A key feature of the questioning for structural indicators is that it leads to at least potentially verifiable factual statements (as yes/no responses). Any suspicion that a state or education institution is window dressing through giving a positive response to a key structural indicator when in fact it is not in a position to do so can be followed up on, if necessary, with further questions to require proof of claims being made. This incorporation of a focus on structural indicators goes beyond a traditional qualitative/quantitative distinction in assessing system level progress in an area.

A key theoretical framework adopted in the book is Bronfenbrenner's (1979) well-recognised ecological theory of systems used in developmental, educational and community psychology, where he distinguishes a range of different system level interactions. A major limitation to Bronfenbrenner's (1979) framework of concentric nested systems of interrelation is that it tended to omit a dynamic focus not only on time but on system *change*. This gap in understanding system change means that Bronfenbrenner's accounts offer little understanding of system blockage and displacement. It is arguable that these deficiencies were only partially addressed with Bronfenbrenner's later concept of chronosystem to express temporal dimensions. The structural indicators focus for system change seeks to address this gap in Bronfenbrenner through identifying areas of system blockage for prison education that needs to be overcome.

### **A National Strategy of Education for Prisoners (Structural Indicator)**

A comprehensive lifelong learning strategy at national level must embrace access to lifelong learning not only for socially excluded groups in general, but also the significant group of those in prison, many of whom experience social marginalisation. It is evident from a number of national reports that prison education is outside the Pale of strategic focus and intervention at national level in some countries. For example, the Slovenian national report recognises that:

There are no special national policy papers on adult education in prisons while there are separate (national) strategies defining goals and measures related to specific target groups, e.g. Roma (Ivančič et al. 2010).

It is only in recent years, according to the Belgian (Flanders) national report, that a focus has occurred at national level on prison education:

Up to a few years ago, policy makers in Belgium paid little attention to adult education in prison. The national policy documents from before the turn of the millennium were focused on issues like labour in prison, release on parole, etc. In case norms did regulate aspects of the regime in prison (including education) they did not do so in a directive way. Sometimes adult education was referred to in official letters from ministers or their administration or in the rules and regulations made by the prisons themselves (Vermeersch and Vandenbroucke 2010).

This report continues:

One of the most important policy documents on access to adult education in prisons in the Flemish Community of Belgium is, at this moment, the 'Strategic Plan on social help and services to inmates' ( *Het strategisch plan hulp- en dienstverlening aan gedetineerden* ) (2000 ). Its main objective is to improve close cooperation between different services funded by the Flemish Government in order to offer detainees quality social aid, education, vocational training, sports and leisure activities. At this moment, the plan has been implemented in eight prisons. In the near future this will be the case in all Flemish prisons. The plan has been evaluated for the first time in 2008 (Vermeersch and Vandenbroucke 2010).

Reforms in relation to prison education also appear to be taking place in Lithuania. As a Lithuanian Education Ministry official states:

*Government decision on convicts' education development is being arranged right now. There is a concrete decision being arranged to expand opportunities for them, so that they could learn in prison (Taljunaite et al. 2010).*

Significantly, there is some legislative basis for prison education in Lithuania, according to the Lithuanian national report source:

According to the interviewee, the time of participation of prisoners in the education is regulated by law and funding is provided with regard to the number of teaching hours. The law allows not more than one teaching (advice) hour per week on all subjects that a particular prisoner chooses to study (Taljunaite et al. 2010).

However, making prison education a funding priority appears to be a difficulty in Lithuania, thereby illustrating that it is not adopting a rights-based approach to education in prison:

*Again, the participation in the prison workshops is very clearly defined in the plan of education, and is it ... in practice, I can say... it depends on how much financial resources we have to pay the teachers ... Prisoners receive only a limited, very limited, number of teacher consultations... the funding is limited and inadequate... (Taljunaite et al. 2010).*

Prison education in Hungary 'belongs to competence of Ministry of Affairs and Labour' (Balogh et al. 2010). This would *prima facie* appear to narrow its scope.

The Estonian national report locates funding and national policy, by way of contrast with Hungary, in its Education Ministry (Tamm and Saar 2010).

A corollary of an adequate national strategy is that sufficient funding is allocated for the implementation of that strategy, so that it is not solely existing on paper:

*Both [Hungarian prison institution] interviewees assume that the number of educational programmes and funding sources have declined in the last two years. Senior manager: There has not been significant development on this field in the last years. The education can't be successful without available funding sources. I think, we fulfil the elemental education, but I don't think that the overall education would be a great success in this prison. We have worked out a lot of useful programmes, there are clubs and trainings, but I miss a structured and expedient system. We can work out personal developmental plan for every prisoner involved, but there are not available educational programmes for realisation. Thus, we can't provide adequate programmes for the prisoners; we just try to insert them into the existing educational programmes and we try to motivate them (Balogh et al. 2010).*

A concern emerging from the Austrian report is that in contrast to the impetus for recent reforms to prison education, for example, in Belgium and Lithuania, there appears to be little appetite for further engagement with prison education at a national level in Austria. For example, the Education Ministry official in Austria gave the following response:

Are there specific plans to improve access to education for adults in prisons in your country? Please specify. *No.*

What, in your opinion, are the obstacles to developing prison education? *In terms of cooperation with the different authorities concerned with this issue, like mentioned in other questions about obstacles, the problems are similar (Rammel and Gottwald 2010)*

This situation in Austria contrasts also with that of Denmark. The Discussion Document for the Conference *Pathways to Inclusion* observes, 'Most prison schools in Denmark have been granted the status of 'local adult education centres' ' (DG, EAC 2010, p. 40).

In stark contrast to Austria, a strategic approach to prison education is evident in the Bulgarian national report:

An organised process of general and vocational training of prisoners is carried out in the Bulgarian

prisons. Most of the prisoners are illiterate, with low educational level and lack of professional qualification. Schools in prison are opened and closed by the Ministry of Education and Science (MES) upon the proposal of the Ministry of Justice (Boyadjieva et al. 2010).

The Bulgarian national report provides evidence not only of availability of prison education but also successful graduation by prisoner students from education courses across a range of prisons.

It is notable that more than one interviewee working in an Irish prison highlights a distinct lack of political will and dearth of interest in prison education at national level:

*The tutor asserts, to be honest with you, I think the primary obstacle is that the prison service doesn't really value education. They just think, oh, it's a good activity, keeps them quiet, takes them off the landing (Dooley et al. 2010).*

The Senior Official in the Prison explained that there are political obstacles to improving education for prisoners:

*Well my experience, I can only tell you what my experience is...I have never met any Minister or opposition person that was interested in the welfare of the prisoner, absolutely none, they have far and only interest in exploiting any weaknesses in the system like giving out about the high recidivist rate or the lack of this or that or the victims or sentencing or whatever it would be (Dooley et al. 2010).*

This latter interviewee suggests that neither international pressure nor economic arguments for the benefits of lifelong learning in prison would shift the system level inertia and disinterest in relation to education in Irish prisons.

Despite the pessimism in relation to national level interest in prison education, this interviewee does acknowledge system level progress in the related area of prison health care in an Irish context:

*What I would be saying or conceding or acknowledging would be that over the last five, six, seven years in particular of all the areas that we have made the most progress would be in health care... Far more progress in health care than in any other area from recruitment of nurse managers, complex managers, recruitment of more doctors and more doctor hours.*

*Psychiatric services would be greater resourced now... the recruitment of addiction counsellors, the recruitment of additional nurses, all that sort of stuff. Now the tendering out of pharmacy services to a pharmacy service that is brought in to distribute the drugs, methadone and all drugs. We would have made quite significant progress in relation to, our policy of treating people who need hospital treatment and specialised treatment in the community and it has worked very well (Dooley et al. 2010).*

This gives some grounds for hope for the future regarding system level reform in relation to prioritisation of lifelong learning in Irish prisons.

The English national report provides an example of a national strategy for prison education:

In 2005 the Government published a Green Paper titled *Reducing Re-Offending through Skills and Employment* where the national strategy was outlined: "Key proposals [of this strategy] include a stronger focus on jobs, with more relevant skills training, led by employer needs; a new 'employability contract' for offenders, with incentives for participation; and a 'campus' model for learning to ensure continuity of education from prisons into the community" (HM Government, 2005:5) (Engel et al. 2010).

Goals of prison education are defined as to:

- develop a learning and skills service as an integral part of the offender management process, to provide offenders with skills for life and improves their employability,
- use sentences to improve employment opportunities—i.e., arrange Fresh start interviews and job searches, and set Education, Training and Employment Activity

Requirements as part of the new sentencing framework,

- develop strategies nationally, regionally and locally for engaging employers in providing jobs for ex-offenders,



– put employability and employment at the heart of supervision in the community for every unemployed offender (Engel et al. 2010).

While a national strategic approach to access to lifelong learning in prison is to be welcomed in this English example, it nevertheless remains a concern that the goal of employment subordinates other legitimate goals of lifelong learning—such as active citizenship, social cohesion and personal fulfilment. An EU Commission conception of access to lifelong learning operates with a broader lens and includes all citizens and therefore encompasses prisoners and prison education within its ambit of relevance.

### **Opportunities for Distance Education and Web-Based Learning in Prison (Structural Indicator)**

According to the Russian national report, distance education is a feature of some Russian prisons:

Some prisons provide higher correspondent and distant education for prisoners willing to obtain higher education degree. In the Russian Penitentiary system there are 8 institutions of higher education that has 7 branches through the country, including the Academy of Law, 74 educational centres, and an institute for advanced training. In recent years, this tendency has become quite widespread and adopted by a number of prisons across the territory of the Russian Federation. It can be partially explained with the fact that the government has started to promote the policy of transforming penitentiary institutions into centres of social rehabilitation. Therefore, the system of flexible educational training for prisoners is being elaborated and maintained, including distant and correspondent modes of learning (Kozlovskiy et al. 2010).

An example of an extensive distance education network is described in the Russian national report, with availability to prisoners who can pay a reduced rate to participate in such distance education:

Modern Humanitarian Academy (MHA) is a private licensed and accredited educational institution providing distant education of all levels, starting from primary and secondary professional education to higher professional education (BA, MA, specialist degree) and postgraduate programmes. The Academy is listed in the Guinness Book of Records as the biggest educational network embracing 14 % of the planet. The Academy students number 13 % of all Russian students today.

Education at MHA is paid but the prisoners pay a reduced fee, which can be decreased to 70% of the standard price. The educational programmes can be paid either by the families of prisoners or by prisoners themselves (in that case tuition fee is extracted from the prisoners' salaries). Since MHA is not a state educational institution, the state does not provide any financial support for prisoners in terms of scholarships, student loans, free re-education or free education (Kozlovskiy et al. 2010).

The Russian national report highlights that this distance education approach in prison has received European awards. The Russian national report however adds a cautionary note about the pervasiveness of distance education across prisons in Russia:

However, the listed examples embrace a very small amount of prisoners in Russia so far. Most prisons are still either poorly or entirely not equipped for supporting distant education (Kozlovskiy et al. 2010).

Youth prisons are described in the Hungarian national report as receiving distance education, though with a recognition that high turnover limits the opportunities for learning:

Another disadvantaged group supported by the [digital] institute is prisoners: Education in a youth-prison was launched immediately after the foundation of the school, with the contribution of *Földes Ferenc* Secondary School teachers who went to the prison to give lessons. This cooperation between the institute and the prison has been successful since the beginning, even if providing education to prisoners is quite difficult. Young prisoners might spend only a short time in the same prison and thus class headcount often falls down from 15 at the beginning to 2 at the end of the year, which then causes financial problems. Prisoners' motivation and performance varies from rather poor to very high: some of them are almost illiterate, but others continue their studies in the institute even after their release, and continue to enter third level education (Balogh et al. 2010).

The Estonian national report observes that security reasons are the biggest obstacle to distance learning and

web-based learning in prison:

Computers and the Internet are not permitted for security reasons. Materials and assignments are sent by mail (Tamm and Saar 2010).

*Distance learning opportunities are still not offered. Prisoners should be able to attend distance courses but how to organise this?* (Tamm and Saar 2010).

Security concerns were also raised regarding the Internet in prison, in the Hungarian national report.

According to interviewees in the Lithuanian national report, there is recognition that there is a need for change to a system which prevents use of the Internet for educational purposes:

The [prison management] interviewees think that the procedures should be changed. One of the possible solutions would be allowing to use the internet for educational purposes in this prison *perhaps it could be some way that the prisoners would be able to access filtered Internet, which could provide educational material ... Yes, at least to filtered Internet and the material for reading ...* (Taljunaite et al. 2010).

However, computer facilities in prison described in the Belgian national report also refer to the excision of Internet access from such facilities.

The Irish national report also highlights security concerns with access to the Internet:

The main obstacle to distance education is security in the prison, the tutor expresses views on this issue, *I personally think there shouldn't be any obstacles because...it's a literacy...digitally literacy...it's essential...I think it's just a psychological thing in the Irish Prison Service's head...It's up and running in other countries...security overrides everything but personally I don't think it should* (Dooley et al. 2010).

When asked about the obstacles to distance education, the Senior Manager explained that there are:

*Huge difficulties in Ireland, in Irish prisons and I am sure in other prisons, huge difficulties have surfaced. Up to very short time ago prisoners had access to computers and some had access in their own cells for learning purposes, Open University, that sort of stuff. The recent trends as you saw coming in the gate where there is a huge emphasis put students, where they can come along and access a pc, there is a member of staff there if...and if they can't help them with the subject, perhaps some of the technicalities or often they upon, to a degree, almost an obsession, put on security has meant that a lot of technology the prisoners had, including computers, have been withdrawn* (Dooley et al. 2010).

The senior manager elaborates on this:

*You can push security, you can justify withdrawing everything, including fresh air almost on the basis of security. So in terms of technology to facilitate distance learning, by and large that's not on anymore. We do have some facilities in classrooms now under supervision and we do have facilities in the library, under supervision where they can access, but in their cells, very, very limited* (Dooley et al. 2010).

It appears that security reasons are a pervasive barrier to distance education and web-based learning in at least a number of European countries. While reasons for limiting prisoners' communication with the world outside prison are obvious, it must be technologically possible to devise programmes to allow for limited external communication and access to key aspects of the Web for prisoners' distance education.

This technological development needs to be instantiated as a matter of priority across prisons in the EU—what is being presented as a technological problem is *de facto* more a lack of political will to access the appropriate technology for this limited external communication. The European Commission has a role to play here in encouraging tenders to develop appropriate technology to facilitate lifelong learning in prison through distance education and web-based learning. It requires an evaluative framework of indicators to ensure that good practice in implementing access to technology in prison for educational purposes can not only be shared but *required* of Member States. Supposed technological difficulties in providing restricted access simply must not be used as a veil to hide behind the implementation of the right to access to education in prison.



### **An Education Strategy for High-Security Prisons (Structural Indicator)**

A coherent strategic approach to lifelong learning in prison at national and prison institutional level must also encompass high-security prisons. A significant and notable contrast between policies for high-security prisons in relation to lifelong learning is evident between the Lithuanian, Irish and Bulgarian national reports on the one hand and the English national report on the other hand. The Lithuanian national report provides the example of how high-security prison is a barrier to lifelong learning:

In theory, life-long learning and rehabilitation goals are provisioned in Lukiskes Prison strategic action plan for 2008–2010, but the possibilities and conditions for prisoners' education are restricted by other regulations, i.e., the highest level of prison security restricts education possibilities (Taljunaite et al. 2010).

Despite a progressive approach to prison education in other kinds of prisons in Bulgaria, there is a similar barrier to education, as in Lithuania, for those in high-security prisons:

Those who have life sentences cannot participate in the educational process, as well as those who are under strict confinement until their status is changed (Boyadjieva et al. 2010).

Yet the English national report provides the following account of a high-security prison with a proportion of prisoners with long or lifetime sentences:

The education provided helps to break down the sentence for the individual, *education helps to keep people focused, so you might have somebody who has got a very long sentence who might be able to work on their education in small bites, so instead of saying I'm going to do a minimum of 14 years, they could be looking at completing a literacy courses now and they might aim to do a GCSE [Graduate Certificate of Secondary Education] and then possibly an OU [Open University] course, it helps to break down the sentence into more manageable chunks and so it gives somebody some sort of hope really* (Senior manager) (Engel et al. 2010).

It is the very longevity of the prison sentence in the English high-security prison that is interpreted as being a particular opportunity to engage in lifelong learning.

Across national reports, there would appear to be a general policy vacuum at national level in relation to lifelong learning for high-security prisons in particular. The English prison example provided here offers a progressive way forward for the engagement of high-security prisoners with lifelong learning. This English approach is clearly in contrast with the security-dominated approach in the following Irish prison example:

The tutor on obstacles to implementation and expansion of education in prison stated, *so much segregation...almost 100 guys on 23 hour lock up, which means they're only let out of their cell for 1 hour a day...for exercise, because legally they have to do that ...all to do with the gangland stuff that happening, so it's for their own protection, or for somebody else's protection. They can't come to school. In the last year or two... this is a new problem. They can't get up to school cause they can't mix so we do go down to where they are...very limited...what we're doing is kind of skeletal and it's just a presence really... no real learning going on as such.* Protection prisoners are locked up for 23 hours each day (Dooley et al. 2010).

### **Establishment and Implementation of a Principle of Normality in Prisons (Structural Indicator)**

An important principle is established in Norwegian prisons according to its national report; this is the principle of normality:

Prisoners in Norway maintain the same rights to education as citizens outside the prison. This is called the principle of normality. As a consequence, the municipality has established a division for public adult education within the prison. The division is therefore autonomous with regard to the prison system. This autonomy is among many things reflected in the way the employees dress (which is casual clothes and not prison officer uniforms), the way they interact with the prisoners and their responsibility with regard to security (Stensen and Ure 2010).

A related issue is that in Norway a rights-based approach to education exists, including for prisoners. The national report observes however that there are barriers to implementation of this right to education in a prison context:

Despite the fact that prisoners have the same rights to education as every other Norwegian citizen, one of our informants said that for the time being the school only had space for 85 students. The reason for this was lack of economic resources, but our informant said that they were applying for more money so that they could make way for 100 new students. We do not know why they lack the economic resources to offer education to all 392 prisoners, but as the quotation from the Norwegian Correctional Services above demonstrates, it is 'in principle' that the prisoners have the same rights, and perhaps not always in reality (Stensen and Ure 2010).

The Estonian national report provides an account of what appear *de facto* to be an application of a comparable principle of normality to the particular prison, though without the rights-based dimension offered to citizens in Norway:

Teaching methods are those used in adult education. Prisoners sit state examinations equally to students in ordinary schools. This is real learning not a pastime activity. It provides an opportunity to continue education after release (Tamm and Saar 2010).

It is important that any key principle of normality would recognise that positive discrimination is also a possibility given the frequent backgrounds of social marginalisation in the prison population. A life normalisation principle is not different from recognition of distinct needs and vulnerabilities in much of the prison population; it requires and implies the need for positive discrimination in the area of prison education.

The benefits of such a systemic change informed by a basic principle of normality (and EU funds to provide supports) appear evident from the Estonian national report:

Five years ago it seemed that prison education was stuck in a stagnant state. Now things are changing constantly—learning culture, etc. The system has improved significantly. The changes have had a great impact on both the quality of education and the learning environment (Tamm and Saar 2010).

The changes in the learning environment, teachers' attitudes and teaching methods have had a noticeable impact on the prisoners' attitudes to learning:

*The first year was a breaking point—we came with new ideas and practices; we were enthusiastic and that was catching. The prison psychologist said at the graduation ceremony: 'The people who sit here are not convicts; they are students' (Tamm and Saar 2010).*

The need for supports regarding the psycho-social and emotional problems of some prisoners is another dimension to a positive discrimination principle to operate within a broader principle of normalisation. As the Norwegian report highlights:

The prison has a section for sick prisoners and a health section, and one informant added that: *Many of the inmates have mental problems, and many become mentally ill from serving their sentence (Stensen and Ure 2010).*

In the Irish context, Seymour and Costello (2005) have also highlighted the extreme number of people in Irish prisons with backgrounds of psychiatric disorders and homelessness. This wider issue of mental health supports for prisoners also needs to be addressed.

Severe scepticism is evident from the following Irish prison management interviewee regarding any kind of prison mission statement, whether committing to a principle of normality or otherwise; when questioned about the prison mission statement and whether it refers to lifelong learning or rehabilitation goals, the Senior Manager stated,

*well now it doesn't mention lifelong learning at all and went on to give his views on it: the vision statement for the prison service is something like it would help people to prepare people for their release to live law abiding life styles, but I wouldn't pay any attention to vision statements [or strategic plans] because they are rubbish, in terms of meaningfulness. They don't mean nothing. Our numbers here in the last six months just simply highlight the lunacy and the cosmetic foundation and the shallowness*

*of that mission statement. I suppose I would argue very strongly that unless you show basic human respect for the individual first by providing civil and humane facilities like toilets, beds, clothing, food, very basic stuff. Unless you do that first there is no use pretending to the prisoner who was lying on the floor for the last month that we have your welfare at heart when he knows physically that I am fucking in bits down here. So I would argue that the Irish prison service vision statement is just a cosmetic exercise in having a vision or a statement or whatever (Dooley et al. 2010).*

This highlights the need for stronger processes of scrutiny of prison education and prison conditions at EU level, in addition to Council of Europe monitoring procedures.

### **Individual Education Plans for Prisoners (Structural Indicator)**

According to this Scottish national report example, once a learner in prison started on a course, an individual learning plan is produced:

*They have a learning plan which is drawn up when they first enrol. Contractually there is a review of that plan every six months, providing they are still there. In addition to that, as a college, we are actually introducing a three monthly progress report, that the member of staff teaching that individual will do on things like motivation, attendance, progression, achievement and things like that ... The learning plans will vary quite dramatically with the prisoner. Often the prisoner actually doesn't know what he is coming in to do. We will advise and sometimes actually for the poorer ones attending for two months... two months is... an achievement (Prison education college manager) (Weedon et al. 2010).*

An individual education plan for a prisoner is also adopted in Hungary, according to this account of a prison from the Hungarian national report:

There is not any procedure for identifying specific learning difficulties, however individual developmental educational programmes are provided by mentors for every participant (Balogh et al. 2010).

However, it is not clear the extent to which this is a pervasive feature of the Hungarian prison system. It is important to emphasise that an individual education plan needs to be a democratic process operating against a backdrop of good relations between the prisoner and the tutor:

*...opinion sharing with the participant, shared learning goals built upon the participant's life experiences. The most important principles are as follows: Manager: Personality- focused attitude is the most important. Our educational method is built upon the client's personality, knowledge and learning tempo. At the beginning we offer them methods, and they choose the best liked one. The partnership is a base feature: we learn a lot from the clients, because they have widespread life-experience, thus we respect them (Balogh et al. 2010).*

A perceived barrier to implementation of individual education plans for prisoners that is noted in the Hungarian national report is the lack of accurate information on a prisoner's previous educational background:

There is no correct information available on the educational levels of the prisoners in most cases, because the prisoners have no grade card (they have lost it or they have never got it). Often the prisoners give false information concerning their educational level, because they are not motivated in participating in educational programmes provided by the prison (Balogh et al. 2010).

It is evident that an individual education plan is not yet a systemic feature of the prison system in Belgium (Flanders), though this prison management interviewee is strongly of the opinion of the need for such a plan:

*My dream is an individual 'detention plan' for every detainee in Flanders. In this plan the detainee, the prison governor, the Flemish Community and the court of law specify what the prisoner will do during his time of sentence. This plan includes adult education. If all prisoners have such a plan, a more coherent provision of educational opportunities spread over all prisons will follow logically (Vermeersch and Vandenbroucke 2010).*

A collaborative approach does however exist across the prison in Belgium, when engaging with the individual prisoner's educational needs; this is a key prerequisite for a process of developing an individual education

plan:

Adult education in the *Oudenaarde* penitentiary is supported in many ways. The education coordinator, the prison governor and prison staff, the psycho-social aid team, etc. all work together to help the detainees in their educational process (Vermeersch and Vandenbroucke 2010).

An optimal development would be to follow this psychosocial needs logic to furnish an integrated individual health and education plan for each prisoner.

It is important to emphasise that the learner in prison needs to be actively involved in the design of the plan and to take ownership over the plan's goals. Any individual plan which renders the prisoner passive in this planning process—through a plan which is prepared for the individual and not in conjunction with him or her—is highly unlikely to succeed. The very logic of an individual education plan approach in educational psychology is that it is based on a constructivist approach where the individual is an active learner. Application of individual education plans to the prison context is a logical corollary of commitment to a principle of normality in prisons, as applied to lifelong learning in prison.

### Initial Assessment Approaches for Prisoners (Structural Indicator)

It is important to recognise that any approach to initial assessment of prisoners in relation to their literacy skills upon entry to prison must be part of a wider relational strategy to engage prisoners in education. This dialogical approach rather than a social control approach to referral and initial assessment is highlighted in the Scottish national report:

*From the outset there's a first night in custody. And there are peer support workers who are prisoners who have been trained. And they go and speak to the guys, see they are settled in. They go with referral forms and they can refer to a lot of different things. They can just make them aware of what's available. Help for various things, bereavement. They can just say 'these are available do you want any referrals'. And I get a lot of referrals from them. Because if there's anything comes up, if there's a form to be filled out and maybe one prisoner will say to the other 'I've difficulty with this' they could then say 'you could have a chat with K, you could, you know, it's confidential, it's one to one'. When men are convicted there's a week induction at the prison. And that week gives all the agencies, housing, Job centre plus, various employment, the Samaritans that runs within the prison, somebody from [the] College goes in and they talk about again what services are available... [the] College also do an assessment (Prison education literacy tutor) (Weedon et al. 2010).*

It is notable that prison staff, in this Scottish example, receive training in raising awareness about literacy needs in a sensitive fashion:

*If the issue of reading or writing comes up, they will say 'do you want a chat with K, it's just a, you don't have to sign up for anything, do you want a chat'. And quite a few of the staff in the prison have taken part in Clan training, awareness-raising training (Prison education literacy tutor) (Weedon et al. 2010).*

A concern is raised by interviewees in the Scottish national report regarding imposition of initial assessments on incoming prisoners:

The main concern of the literacy tutor was that prisoners were not targeted by prison officers as requiring literacy tuition and told that they had to do it. She felt this was likely to be counterproductive. One final source of referrals she identified was other prisoners—word of mouth (Weedon et al. 2010).

This emphasis is on dialogue, invitation and explanation rather than an imposed test. The need for such an initial assessment process regarding literacy, given the background educational profile of prisoners, is a strong theme in the Scottish national report:

A report for the Prison Reform Trust suggested that around 20–30 % of the prison population have learning difficulties or disabilities (Talbot 2008). According to one of the prison interviewees there was a *concentration of people in prison with the same sort of needs*. There were a range of mechanisms for identifying those that may benefit from participation in learning which started on entry and continued



after a prisoner had been convicted. During this period other agencies were also involved.

College staff could offer assessment of learning needs and, if a prisoner was considered in need of literacy tuition (Weedon et al. 2010).

A prison manager similarly emphasised the high amount of early school leavers in prison in Scotland:

*She supported this view by giving an account of a typical prisoner: I would suggest that the average prisoner will come to us having stopped schooling round about first or second year [aged 12–13]. Will perhaps either not have worked or worked in very casual jobs with a raft of sort of social issues between them. But in terms of their education, I don't know how many times I have filled in learning plans, left school first year, second year, that is so, so common (Prison education college manager) (Weedon et al. 2010).*

The Irish national report highlights a reluctance to engage in compulsory initial assessment:

*Literacy is a strong element of the prison education service curriculum since the early 1980s. In relation to identifying prisoners with literacy problems, the tutor firstly explained that they don't have initial assessment, until they come to the school because they are against... blanket testing... I think it goes against the ethos of adult education... but when they do present themselves, there is (Dooley et al. 2010).*

A wider process of formal induction is sought by the Prison Senior Manager, though highlighting that it is currently not in place in any systemic fashion in Irish prisons:

In relation to initial assessment of prisoners, the Senior Manager explained that

*... in any of the prisons in Ireland at the moment there is no such thing as any type of formal structured induction at all so prisoners come in the gate and they could be here for one month or twenty months or forty months and they are interviewed alright when they come in and they, in relation to a sort of induction interview but there's no such thing as people going through a sort of a process of induction where their health, their education, their interests are monitored (Dooley et al. 2010).*

The Lithuanian national report illustrates a number of obstacles to initial assessment of prisoners, including sheer numbers of prisoners (though this is decreasing somewhat), overcrowded prisons and public attitudes towards prisoners. Yet it is noted that literacy is a real problem among prisoners in Lithuania and needs to be addressed as part of a holistic strategy (Taljunaite et al. 2010 ).

It is important that any system of initial assessment be carried out in a climate of dialogue, invitation and explanation rather than one of social control which would be counterproductive for those with low levels of basic education. Carrigan and Downes' (2009) international review of initial assessment instruments and research observed the following key dimensions:

#### ***Four dimensions to a high-quality initial needs and skills check***

1. An initial semi-structured interview involving self-assessment

2. A piece of writing on a theme of relevance and interest chosen by the learner to be examined according to simple and transparent standardised criteria

3. A short tool with a menu of options for examining literacy with thematic content which can be chosen by the learner from a range of possibilities and which have been proofed for cultural sensitivity and social class bias

4. Development of an individual education plan in dialogue with the learner, where the learner retains ownership over all of the needs and skills check information and is assured from the outset that the results are not being used in an exclusionary way on their use pertained to the context of adult learners with low literacy skills (Carrigan & Downes 2009).

This has direct application to the prison context. The following issues were also highlighted in this report:

Any process of devising and employing appropriate tools for learning needs to include scope for the learner to construct meaning rather than simply process decontextualised information. The language being used needs to be meaningful to the life and culture of the learner and the process requires one where the learner is in control of and has scope for choice within the features of the needs and skills

identification process. Adult education is traditionally committed to principles of active learning and these also need to be applied to the learner's active learning regarding their own learning needs. These issues rule out the use of multiple-choice testing in any form of this needs and skills identification process. (Carrigan and Downes 2009, p. 63)

Sticht (1999) advocates avoiding using a standardised test with learners when they first begin a programme as adult learners may be nervous and frightened and therefore their abilities may be underestimated. Ecclestone (2005) highlights the view in the international literature that norm referenced assessment in general has negative educational and social effects.

### **Sufficient Space in Prison for Education (Structural Indicator)**

A pervasive theme in national reports is prison overcrowding as a barrier to education. This is especially emphasised in the Irish national report, where overcrowding has in effect severely limited availability of space and motivation for education (Dooley et al. 2010). The Belgian (Flanders) national report recognises this problem but also illustrates how it has been partly overcome in a particular prison:

Due to the early 20th century infrastructure and the overcrowding, there is not much place...to organise education and create a classroom environment...still, over the years, several (smaller) classrooms and one (bigger) polyvalent room were built and renovated in the prison building. Because of the success of the Education Project...an extra classroom was built in the chapel last year (Vermeersch and Vandenbroucke 2010).

The Hungarian national report emphasises not only prison overcrowding, despite recent improvements, but also observes that prison classes are in a separate space of the prison:

Senior manager: *The number of the prisoners has decreased from 18000 to 14900 in our country in the last few years, and new prisons have been established, but the prisons are still overcrowded* (Balogh et al. 2010).

The prison classes take place in the separate site of the building. The library and the office of the organisers are in this site too. There are about 10,000 books in the library (mainly old books ...). The librarian is a prisoner, too. The formal education programmes take place in the 3 class-rooms (calm environment, benches for 30–35 persons, board, projector). The non-formal education programmes take place mainly in the library (personal trainings and small group trainings), and sometimes in the class-rooms (Balogh et al. 2010).

An innovative approach to educational delivery is highlighted for more than one prison in the English national report. This approach is of using the prison wings themselves as sites for education and not simply to have a separate education section. This may help in relation not only to working within limitations of space in prison but also may have a range of positive knock-on consequences regarding the pervasiveness of education in the prison institutional culture:

The wing-based delivery of education ... has been successful in expanding access to educational opportunities. Wing-based education intends to allow for greater flexibility in providing adult education in prison. Wing-based education allows for the provision of education to extend beyond the physical structure of the education department into the residential units at the prison in order to better integrate education into the organisation of the prison... The senior management representative explained, *education was always something that went on in that building over there or in those rooms, by delivering on the wings, people see it now as part and parcel of every day activity* (Engel et al. 2010).

According to the prison management, wing-based delivery of education:

*Engages more prisoners because they feel...more comfortable in their own surroundings that they're moving across [and] it also raises the profile of learning and skills with the officers on the wings because they're involved in making sure men attend...certainly in Ofsted reports, that's been looked on very favorably* (Engel et al. 2010).

This issue is further explored in the English national report:



The wing-based delivery of education in and of itself has a number of perceived strengths and weaknesses. Among the strengths is the flexibility it allows individuals in terms of their access to education. It has been successful in allowing vulnerable prisoners access to education. The wing-based education *is flexible and adaptable...most of our tutors on the wing will teach literacy and numeracy and drug awareness and alcohol awareness up to level 2* (Manager of the education department). It has also promoted education within the prison and officers on each of the wings, and increased engagement of prisoners, due to prisoners' likelihood to feel comfortable. The manager of the education department stated, *the acceptance of the lads that education is part and parcel of life is facilitated by wing education*.

It is important to emphasise that wing-based delivery is *not* replacing a separate educational site in prison but is complementary to it (Engel et al. 2010).

The Hungarian national report recognises the central importance of a separate educational site:

According to the organiser, this prison has an advantage over the other prisons by having a separate site for culture and classrooms. However, according to the senior manager, more rooms would be necessary for providing sufficient educational programmes (Balogh et al. 2010).

Yet a wing-based delivery approach in the English prisons is a *both/and* model with a separate additional educational site in the prison. It must be additional rather than a device to improve education statistics on behalf of the prison or as a window-dressing gesture to prevent prisoners taking court cases for access to education.

It is evident that this approach offers much potential for replication and amplification elsewhere. It deserves investigation at a systemic level nationally and at EU level to explore the feasibility of implementing such wing-based education across a wide range of prisons. A related avenue here, which is ripe for development, is for integration of the arts into the wings of the prison, as part of an educational focus, to bring the arts away from the periphery and to ensure that its motivational opportunities are activated for learners in prison.

The Irish national report does acknowledge, however, some difficulties to such prison wing-based learning, namely, security-related issues:

When asked if there are practices of peer mentoring in education in prison, the tutor said, *yes, the Toe by Toe...literacy programme...some guys are trained up to do teaching with some of the other guys... The idea is that it would happen down in the landing and in the cell...very small scale. Sometimes officers not very happy to have two prisoners in the cell together, suspicious of their motives, doesn't happen in the school, as it's our attempt to bring education down the landing...it's big in the UK as well, up and running in the UK for a long time* (Dooley et al. 2010).

An Irish Report on an Inspection of Mountjoy Prison by the Inspector of Prisons Judge Reilly (2009) expands on this security point:

The gangs in the prison must be kept apart to prevent violence and this causes great logistical difficulties for management (2009, p.12).

However, this is not an insurmountable barrier to prison wing learning, but rather a *caveat* as to its implementation due to interpersonal and intergroup factors in a given prison.

Whereas Downes (2003) highlighted a range of concerns with prison conditions in Estonia, especially for Russian-speaking prisoners, the Estonian national report argues that there has been significant improvement in facilities, space and also attitudes and ethos regarding prisons in Estonia:

The new prison which is under construction will have a separate educational centre. This gives the prison an opportunity to offer more hobby activities. Currently extracurricular activities are organised by prison officers. Schools (both general educational institutions and vocational educational institutions) should cooperate more with prison workers in this field. Compared with four years ago, the prison system has evolved significantly: attitudes have changed towards learning, organisation of learning, cooperation of prison officers and teachers (Tamm and Saar 2010).

EU funds clearly seem to have been an engine for reform of prisons, including prison education, in Estonia:

The prison has classrooms. *First we got some start-up money from EU to furnish classrooms—desks, teaching materials. Everything is nice and clean. Nothing has been vandalised* (Tamm and Saar 2010).

### **Professional Development Support and Resource Materials for Teachers in Prisons (Structural Indicator)**

It is notable that there is little evidence of professional development and support for teachers working in prisons across the national reports. One partial exception to this general trend is the Russian national report, where a significant enthusiasm was found among teachers in prison for extra professional development opportunities and resources:

Most teachers said they would like to use some professional sources and materials that are particularly aimed at work with prisoners. They asked whether the [research] outcome... somehow presupposed any recommendations for teachers working in prisons with adult learners who have gaps and education and whose motivation is quite low. One of the teachers said she would really love to use some colleagues' experience in work with her students because many of them are depressed, closed, passive and sometimes aggressive and she doesn't always know how to encourage them to study (Kozlovskiy et al. 2010).

The interviews with the teachers revealed:

They would really like to improve their work but they don't know how since they use quite old ways of teaching and no teacher-training courses are available for them. They are ordinary secondary school teachers who have never had any tutoring related to teaching in prison. They elaborated their ways of working with prisoners solely based on their own experience. *Well, I first came here 8 years ago. I didn't understand anything. Well, I knew it was compensatory education and I was working with these kids the same way I would work with any kids in any city school. In two years I would learn something, in three years, I would learn even more about working in prison. And now we actually make our own textbooks... this knowledge, it only comes with time* (Kozlovskiy et al. 2010).

This feature of the teachers developing their own specifically tailored resource materials for working with prisoners is an innovative example to be built upon elsewhere.

The career development of those teaching staff in prisons needs to be addressed in national prison strategies for lifelong learning, as is highlighted in the following extract from the Russian national report:

Among obstacles that prevent development of prison education, the informants list lack of human resources. For teachers, work in prison is not very rewarding; attracting good and qualified teachers to prisons is quite difficult since they are not offered any benefits for working in more difficult conditions than ordinary school teachers (Kozlovskiy et al. 2010).

Veits and Khokhlova (2011, personal communication) add that *'Even though a proclaimed governmental policy with regard to prison education is aimed at transformation of prisons into rehabilitation centres, in practice little is done in order to attract qualified staff into prisons. On the contrary, the new reforms brought to removal any bonuses for teachers working in prisons'*. They suggest that *'those who teach there do that because they cannot find any better teaching positions either due to their age or qualification'*. If this is the case, it is thus imperative to develop more proactive incentives for teaching in prison.

It is notable that a principle of whole school collaboration is extended in an important fashion in Estonia to teachers working in prison:

Teachers are instructed before starting working in prison. The school has organised meetings and exchanges of practices and experience. Teachers from different prisons are in contact with each other; they attend seminars and information days organised by different ministries. *Each institution is different. We can learn from each other. We have visited Viru, Tartu and Murru prisons. The Ministry of Justice is planning a seminar for teachers. The Ministry of Education and Research organised an information day. We have also attended international conferences* (Tamm and Saar 2010).

This key movement away from an individualist focus approach of the isolated teacher or tutor in prison to a collaborative approach is particularly important in a prison education context which may bring its own specific

requirements. Development of good practice in the prison education sector requires such collaboration across tutors, as in the Estonian example.

### **Prisoner Exchange Based on Educational Reasons, Including Bridges to External Education Institutions (Structural Indicator)**

A systemic focus implies the need to examine scope for improving communication and connections between prisons in a given country. This cross-prison institutional interaction is important in order to facilitate prisoner exchange based on educational reasons. Such an exchange takes place in the following example from the Belgian (Flanders) national report:

First of all, if the inmate that wants to enrol for a course is imprisoned in some other prison, there has to be an agreement between that prison and the *Oudenaarde* penitentiary to exchange prisoners. Secondly, the candidate must write a letter with his motivation for wanting to take the course. This letter is screened by the education coordinator. By means of this screening procedure, the prison verifies if no other motives play a role in the request for transfer. Besides that, data is gathered on what might be described as the educational history of the prisoner and his mother tongue. Finally, if the prisoner is given access to the Education Project in the *Oudenaarde* penal institution he enters into a study agreement (Vermeersch and Vandenbroucke 2010).

An example from Hungary is not so much one of prisoners changing prisons but rather of prisoners changing environment to engage with the outside world through exam contexts:

The second school leaving exams are taken at an external educational institution ( *Belvárosi Tanoda Alapítvány Gimnázium és Szakközépiskola*— Downtown School Foundation Secondary School and Technical College). The prisoners are transported into that external institution by the staff of the prison, and they take part in the exam wearing prisoners' clothing and under police supervision. However the manager emphasises: *According to our experience the exam at an external institution is a very important step of the re-socialisation. These young people got into a special subculture of the prison. The rules of this world differ from the conventions of the normal society, and usually these people sink into this world. However when they get to a civil institution, they meet peer-groups, and they communicate with civil young people and teachers* (Balogh et al. 2010).

This is a logical application of the principle of normality and is a step forward that needs to be taken at systemic levels across countries. Across national reports there is little evidence of a system level practice of prisoner exchange for educational reasons, either with or without consideration of a bridge to external institutions. If lifelong learning is mainstreamed into the prison management strategic goals and into prison institutional culture, then this practice of prisoner exchange for educational reasons, already occurring in Belgium, could have much wider application.

### **Conclusion**

A number of issues raised are basically matters of good educational practice, such as individual educational plans (IEPs) for prisoners, holistic initial assessment, professional development of prison teachers and availability of relevant resource materials for prison education, as well as recognition of respect for prisoners as learners through a principle of normality in prisons. Other emerging themes, discussed as structural indicators for prison institutions, include a pervasive concern with practical barriers blocking access to education in prison. These include sufficient space in prison for education, facility for prisoner exchange based on educational reasons, including bridges to external education institutions, as well as other systemic obstacles observed in specific contexts. Renewal of strategic commitment to the importance of prison education, at EU Commission, national and local prison institutional levels would involve serious addressing of these practical barriers to prisoners' rights to access education.

In the conclusion of *Access to Education in Europe: A Framework and Agenda for System Change*, it is recommended that the EU Commission consider leading a process, in dialogue with EU Member States, for

the development of agreed structural indicators for access to lifelong learning and social inclusion—for prison education (as well as higher education and non-formal education). These proposed European level indicators would also require a country-specific review process to examine their implementation and development across European countries. Such indicators would include as follows:

<b>Prison Education: Illustrative Structural Indicators</b>	
<input type="checkbox"/>	A national strategy of access to education for prisoners YES OR NO
<input type="checkbox"/>	Opportunities for distance education and web-based learning in prison available to all prisoners (including appropriate technology to limit web access where appropriate) YES OR NO
<input type="checkbox"/>	An education strategy for high-security prisons YES OR NO
<input type="checkbox"/>	National strategic commitment to a principle of normality in prisons with regard to education (i.e., prisoners maintain the same rights to education as individuals outside the prison) YES OR NO
<input type="checkbox"/>	Implementation of a principle of normality in a prison institution YES OR NO
<input type="checkbox"/>	Learner-centred education in prison YES OR NO
<input type="checkbox"/>	Individual education plans for prisoners in a specific prison institution YES OR NO
<input type="checkbox"/>	Holistic initial assessment approaches for prisoners available in a specific prison institution (with the consent of the prisoner) YES OR NO
<input type="checkbox"/>	Sufficient space in a specific prison institution for education YES OR NO
<input type="checkbox"/>	Professional development support for teachers in a specific prison institution YES OR NO
<input type="checkbox"/>	Resource materials available for teachers in a specific prison institution YES OR NO
<input type="checkbox"/>	Prisoner movement across prisons based on educational reasons (including for bridges to external education institutions) YES OR NO

It is important to emphasise that structural indicators are much less expensive to observe than quantitative outcome and process indicators, and thus, there can be more of them employed to scrutinise change in a system. If used judiciously, as part of a focused review process, they can provide a key lens for system transparency to examine State and institutional activity for reform.

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*Access to Education in Europe: A Framework and Agenda for System Change* (doi: 10.1007/978-94-017-8795-6) is available in hardcover (ISBN 978-94-017-8794-9) and as an eBook (ISBN 978-94-017-8795-6).



PRACTITIONER PAPER

## Mystery and Contingency in Correctional Education

by G. WALKER

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**Abstract:** *Citing the work of Maxine Greene, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Thom Gehring, this paper makes the argument that correctional educators attempt to accept that they will never fully understand the lives and perspectives of their students. Noting that some of the questions correctional educators have about the lived experiences of incarcerated and formerly incarcerated students cannot be answered in a way that is fully comprehensible to those who have not lived as prisoners, the paper suggests that developing comfort with mystery will allow educators to focus on instruction.*

**Key words:** *correctional education; reentry; phenomenology; Maxine Greene; Maurice Merleau-Ponty; Thom Gehring*

The City of San Bernardino, California, is similar to, and yet rather unlike, many other impoverished cities in the United States. The high cost of living in southern California presses those with less wealth east, up against the wall of the San Bernardino Mountains. Residential regulations for former offenders in nearby cities, and southern California's automobile-centric infrastructure, mean that many San Bernardino residents do not have the option of living elsewhere in the region. Taking on more than its share of southern California's formerly incarcerated, unemployed, and recovering addict population, coupled with the city's financial struggles, gives the community an air of grungy desperation.

The city is not desolate, however. It is a vibrant home to many. It throbs with life. Unlike other cities in a time of economic downturn, whose centers are forgotten and whose houses stand empty, many people continue to live bustling lives in San Bernardino. While some fled from San Bernardino during its hard times, others fled *to* San Bernardino, to occupy the spaces that opened for them there: living with family members in houses and apartments that would not be affordable in other parts of southern California; residing in motel rooms, in homeless shelters, or half-way houses; and sleeping in public parks or the doorways of commercial buildings.

Weiss (2006) observed the ways that homes become the foundation of our identities. When we have a home that we can take pride in, we nurture it and improve upon it, and in that process build up our sense of ourselves. Weiss wrote that "the city itself takes the place of a home" for the homeless and those in transition. If our home is disordered, we feel ungrounded. If our home is not a house, but instead the open expanse of the city, then the unpredictability of the city becomes part of our identity.

Those who make their homes in a transitional state—those who sleep outdoors, those who live in motels, or the formerly incarcerated reentering society via shelters and half-way houses—live in the "in-between" (Grosz, cited in Weiss, 2006). The in-between is a literal and psychological liminal space with few certainties. Just as life without a physical residence disrupts one's sense of self, a life without the routine of employment, a life in which you are separated from your loved ones, or a life in which drugs or mental illness isolate you from the shared world of others, the in-between makes the promise of an objective reality ring false.

The sense of the in-between should not be unfamiliar to those working in corrections and reentry. The incarcerated certainly live in a literal in-between state, in which their own future and the future of their families



is unknown. But teachers in correctional and reentry settings face the in-between as well. Wright (2008) has described the correctional educator as a “stranger,” residing in the “borderlands” between the representatives of the correctional system and their incarcerated students. Yantz (2008) examined the identity struggles of correctional educators, who often feel “lost” in the prison culture, yet separated from the culture of teachers on the outside.

Many of us who work in correctional and reentry education seek to bridge this borderland area, to make ourselves and our students feel less strange to one another. And, as we spend more time in correctional classrooms, this feeling of strangeness lessens. However, it never fully goes away. The lives of our students will always be somewhat foreign to us.

There are some near-exceptions to this, of course. Thom Gehring wrote about the work of Thomas Mott Osborne, an American prison reformer at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century who went undercover as an inmate at Auburn Prison in New York. Columbia professor Kathy Boudin (1993) served 22 years at Bedford Correctional Facility, continuing to teach and write during her sentence. Several former students at California State University’s San Bernardino Reentry Initiative (CSRI) have been hired in the reentry field, including positions at CSRI, and their experiences build a vital empathetic bridge over the borderlands.

It makes sense that we would crave knowing the lived experiences of our students. However, it’s important to keep in mind that the lived experiences of another person—of *any* person—can never be fully known to us any more than we can simultaneously see ahead and behind us. Merleau-Ponty (1962) wrote,

My human gaze never *posits* more than one facet of the object, even though by means of horizons it is directed towards all the others. It can never come up against previous appearances or those presented to other people otherwise than through the intermediary of time and language. If I conceive in the image of my own gaze those others which, converging from all directions, explore every corner of the [object] and define it, I have still only a harmonious and indefinite set of views of the object, but not the object in its plenitude (p. 80).

When we think about the experience of teaching in a correctional or reentry setting, we summon up our “harmonious and indefinite set of views” about our teaching environment, but we do not experience the environment “in its plenitude” any more than our students experience the correctional classroom from our perspective. We can consider different views of our classrooms based on our memories or by the descriptions of others (“It can never come up against previous appearances or those presented to other people otherwise than through the intermediary of time and language,”) but we will never see more than one “facet” of our classroom at once.

For example, consider the following anecdote: two students get off a bus in front of an office park in southern California. They don’t know each other, but they’re headed to the same destination: the CSRI facility in the City of San Bernardino. One carries a backpack with a laptop, a water bottle, and clean clothes, while the other pulls a laundry cart filled with various items. In the parking lot in front of the CSRI, employees and students are grilling hotdogs and chatting. The newly arriving students are greeted and given bacon-wrapped hotdogs, a southern California delicacy.

We know that the bus trip, the walk, and the parking-lot cook-out was not the same perceived experience for the graduate student visiting California from the east coast as it was for the San Bernardino resident who carted their worldly possessions from bus stop to bus stop all over the city. But how different were these experiences? The fact is, we can never know.

Thom Gehring (2016) who, along with Carolyn Eggleston, founded the CSRI in 2011, provided another anecdote to illustrate the liminal, in-between-ness of correctional and reentry education. Though it serves the official function of a day reporting center for parolees, the CSRI is organized as a school and its operations revolve around classes (for example, GED, ESOL, job skills, and violence prevention are some of the many classes offered through the CSRI’s programs). As a school, the CSRI holds elections for a student government and, to the extent that it’s possible, the student government manages student life at the CSRI. Gehring (201) recalled a burglary that occurred soon after the CSRI first opened that resulted in the loss of some computer equipment. Gehring said that “five weeks after the event, the elected government leaders had a closed door meeting with a student [...] The next day that student told the director that he need to leave the CSRI; his pa-

pers were processed without inquiry, and there have been no break-ins or burglaries since” (p. 115).

According to Gehring, this incident demonstrated the inevitable mystery of working in reentry facilities. The CSRI’s elected student government brings those involved with the CSRI, but who have not been incarcerated, closer to an understanding of how students experience the CSRI and other programs for former inmates. However, for correctional educators and staff, there will always be a mysterious dimension to the interactions and experiences of their students. What happened in that closed-door meeting is a mystery to Gehring; most interesting of all, though, is Gehring’s comfort with not knowing.

“There is a certain mystery about the CSRI and its workings [...] I do not pretend to understand it,” Gehring (2016, p. 114) noted, observing that Thomas Mott Osborne wrote of a similar experience in 1924. Osborne had reorganized the US Naval Prison in Portsmouth, New Hampshire in a way that permitted the inmates to move about the prison campus freely. When asked why the prisoners willingly returned to their cells in the evening instead of escaping, Osborne said, “I don’t understand it [...] I’ve been trying to understand it for six years—ever since I got into this prison game; and I haven’t succeeded yet. However, don’t let it worry you; it is not necessary that either of us should understand it” (quoted in Gehring, 2016, p. 95).

Of course, this concept is nothing new in the field of education. Maxine Greene (1995) made the exploration of mystery and the unknown in the context of teaching the focus of her life’s work. Asking educators to consider “the experiences of absurdity we live through when our deepest existential questions are met with blank silences” (p. 51), Greene reminded us of Merleau-Ponty’s observation that we can never have a complete view of the world. We may “desire [an] all-encompassing explanation” (p. 193) of the world and its troubles, but that explanation is unlikely to come, and in the meantime, we have to carry on.

Many teachers and educational researchers feel that mystery is something that should be eradicated. Facts count; passing GED scores and low recidivism rates keep programs funded. But the in-between will always remain. We reside in it the same way the homeless reside in the city; it’s complicated and it makes us feel ungrounded. However, this liminality can also be a source of inspiration in our teaching. Gehring said, “I am fueled by the anomalies” (personal communication, August 2015). Openly considering the mysteries we encounter in our lives and the lives of our students without searching for an answer, solution, or data point can bring a rich dimension to our classrooms. We may find that being open to the unknown and the in-between facilitates the very understanding of our students that we can’t manage to find when we labor so hard in hopes of seeing it.

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FEATURE--BOOK REVIEW

## An Unequivocal Challenge to the Value of Mass Incarceration

### Incarceration Nations: A Journey to Justice in Prisons around the World

By Baz Dreisinger

New York: Other Press

Reviewed by BILL MUTH

Baz Dreisinger recently completed a “two year pilgrimage to prisons around the world.” *Incarceration Nations* tells her story as she attempts to penetrate the vagaries of incarceration in nine disparate countries—Rwanda, South Africa, Uganda, Jamaica, Thailand, Brazil, Australia, Singapore and Norway. There is much to be gained from the book, but readers should approach it on its own terms—as a memoir, a personal journey, a form of witnessing. Many of *JPER*’s readers are quite familiar with prisons, even if we do not have Dreisinger’s global perspective. We are accustomed to reading carefully parsed empirical studies as well as moving, first-person practitioner stories. The South African linguist, Hilary Janks (2010), describes two ways to approach a text, which she refers to as *reading with* and *reading against*. We might (and should) approach an experimental study skeptically, reading against the argument, looking for limitations and idiosyncrasies in method or logic. This is how ‘normal science’ progresses, as Kuhn (1962) would say. But *reading against* is not always a fruitful way to read texts, especially those in which the author shares personal experiences and invites readers to see something from her perspective. This requires a leap of faith; it has less to do with *knowing* the Truth and more to do with *understanding* another person’s perspective, beliefs and values.

The right way to approach *Incarceration Nations* is to read *with* it—let yourself into Dreisinger’s story, roll with the fear, disorientation, triumphs, frustration and outrage. The book aims to engage the head *and* the heart. For each prison system she brings to light with her breezy, contextualizing storytelling, Dreisinger provides a backdrop of statistics—in Singapore you can be caned for 30 different crimes; in Brazil, police officers reportedly killed 11,197 people between 2009-2014; in Thailand, only 550 of 25,231 incarcerated women were convicted of violent crimes; almost half of the prisoners in Uganda lacked access to safe drinking water; less than ten percent of the South African prison population is white; after the 1994 genocide and before the reforms of 1998, Rwandan prisons were so overcrowded that some prisoners, called *komeza*, were forced to walk through the night because there was no place to sleep...Dreisinger’s data are well sourced but applied to her stories with a sometimes maddeningly broad brush.

In this book, it is the stories that matter.

So, I resisted the urge to read against the *univocity* of her thesis, which tends to cast all prisons, even the most progressive experiments, as Band Aids on deeper problems, and all prisoners, even those who committed genocidal acts, as worthy of reconciliation, restoration, and forgiveness. This, I readily admit, is an expression of my own equivocal outlook, the day after terrorist attacks in Brussels exposed the limits of my capacity to forgive and transcend judgment. Reading with *Incarceration Nations* meant confronting and temporarily suspending my own desire for retribution. Guardedly, I follow Baz on her trip. With her I: sit in three-hour traffic jams in Kampala; grovel before prison gatekeepers in Uganda who may or may not let us in; hang out in Kigali coffee shops with international workers; get ‘spun’ in unrepresentative model prisons by officials





in Singapore and Brazil; swim at a pristine beach in Perth; sleep in a barbed-wired compound (Uganda) and an exotic colonial-era hotel (South Africa); confront sweltering heat in Bangkok; and ferry across the Skagerrak Strait to Bastøy Prison, Norway. At almost every stop, we see (and smell, touch, taste) the inertia of wasted lives through eyes of prisoners and activists who experience it first-hand—and yet resist.

Resistance to the noxious effects of mass incarceration has many antagonists—from racism and neo-liberal capitalism to tribal hatred and restrictive customs. In *Incarceration Nations* we see how resistance and reform take many *imperfect* forms. Rwanda's wide-scale restorative justice project includes censorship of tribal hate speech and "solidarity camps" in which inmates are indoctrinated to ideals of reconciliation, peace and "antivengence." South Africa's faith-based restorative justice program structures intense confrontations, dialogue and reconciliation, but family relations are complex and the damage is vast; the program is reaching only a fragment of those with needs. In a book club in a Ugandan prison, students respond nonchalantly to a reading of Fredrick Douglass' slave narrative; their own traumas and losses of innocence are embedded not only in society but within the family itself. Brazil closes the notorious Carandiru Prison only to "out super-max" the US-inspired approach to long-term solitary confinement. Australia's enlightened new prisons tout artisanal food and Aboriginal artwork; robust work-study, education and reentry programs; and state-of-the-art industries where prisoners get paid nine dollars a day and earn certifiable, transferrable skills. Yet in Australia this reform is in the hands of private prisons funded by the same global capital that lobbies for harsher sentences to raise occupancy rates for their publicly traded corporations.

What makes the trip compelling is Dreisinger's gift for drawing the reader in, and her physical and emotional bravery. She is not afraid to go into dangerous and extremely depressing places. Nor is she afraid to share her feelings of anger and despair that might betray her deeper, univocally humanist values. For example, leaving Luzira prison:

*...guilt and grief wash over me. It's the same sadness I feel every day I leave class in a prison...*

or learning of Rwandan's efforts to silence those who criticize the current system:

*...I begin to wonder if progress is a mirage...*

or pondering the paradox that prison nurseries are an "improvement on the outside world" for some Thai mothers:

*...which notion is more distressing...the idea that prisons are an improvement on the outside world... or the possibility...that they're essentially on par with it? Both realities suggest that poverty itself is a kind of prison...*

or reflecting on Norway's prisons, perhaps the most humane in the world:

*...prison is prison. No amount of beauty...can make up for the profound loneliness, the isolation, the time-freezing effect of a prison stay...*

or considering the incalculable wreckage done to communities of color in the wake of the U.S.'s punitive crime policies:

*...the reality is that tinkering with the system—a little change here, a bit of reform there, is not likely to produce the 'revolution in values' that Martin Luther King was talking about...*

I read against this last quote. On one level, it is true that each of the reforms described in the book amounts to what Dreisinger calls a “Band-Aid...[sometimes] a supremely engineered one, from which there is plenty to learn, but a Band-Aid still.” But *Incarceration Nations* was never intended as a “how to” book. It was always about human values, deeper commitments, and one person’s open encounters with a series of darkly carnivalesque affronts to her optimistic hypothesis.

And this, I believe, is why Dreisinger’s stories matter. Her specific ideas about reform are partial at best—she departs from a number of countries overwhelmed and in a state of grief—but her honest witnessing works at the level of the heart. Her lived experiences are told openly. We always know where Baz-the-optimist is coming from; yet she unsparingly challenges the viability of these values. Thus readers are invited on an inner journey too—one where uncompromisingly compassionate values are tested by the harshest realities. After all, if Rwandans can take up the anguishing work of post-genocide reconciliation, if Norwegians can transcend the cry for revenge in the wake of the horrific killings in 2011 in Oslo and Utøya Island, if Singapore can transform its shame-based approach to criminality (even if for less than humane reasons), then maybe it’s time to re-examine the desire for retribution lying beneath my own espoused beliefs in transformation and social justice.

Literacy educators Elizabeth Dutro and Andrea Bien described a “speaking wound” that connects writer to reader, “forged by the voice of the Other that speaks at one and the same time to its own and its listener’s pain” (2014, p. 12). Each Band-Aid in *Incarceration Nations* is a threshold to a universally human speaking wound. A wound that speaks to those reading with these piercing stories of human worth and asks us to let them to accumulate and trouble us, even in fearful times.

### Postscript:

Baz Dreisinger, whose experiences setting up the “Prison to College Pipeline” project inside (and outside) a New York State prison are chronicled in volumes one and two of the *Journal of Prison Education and Reentry* (JPER), is an associate professor of English at John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York City. She is also an activist, journalist, freelance documentarian and radio producer. To hear Baz Dreisinger discuss her book with Boston’s public radio host Robin Young, go to: <http://hereandnow.wbur.org/2016/02/10/prisons-around-the-world>

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RESEARCH PAPER

## “How can you live without your kids?”: Distancing from and embracing the stigma of “incarcerated mother.”

by BRITTNIE AIELLO and KRISTA MCQUEENEY  
Merrimack College

**Abstract:** *This article examines how incarcerated mothers constructed moral identities in the face of stigma. Analyzing data from participant observation and 83 in-depth interviews with incarcerated mothers, we show that mothers claimed moral identities by distancing from the stigma of incarceration and/or embracing the identity of incarcerated mothers. Utilizing these strategies, women challenged the stigma of convicted felon/bad mother and reinforced the assumptions that motherhood is compulsory and should be reserved for women with enough money and standing to give their children advantages. The implications for understanding motherhood as a mechanism of moral identity and social control are discussed.*

**Key words:** *criminology; sociology; women's studies*

### Introduction

In our collective imagination, mothers are the glue that holds families together. They are thought to be innately nurturing and gifted with a special ability to care for their children and families (DeVault, 1991). Being a mother is a moral identity (Katz, 1975; McMahon, 1995)—an identity that signifies moral value, worth, and character. Yet, “mother” cannot be reduced to a “master status” (Hughes, 1945) that enforces universal meanings on all mothers or trumps other identities. “Mother” identities are influenced by class, race/ethnicity, nationality, sexuality, and other cross-cutting identities, which are implicated in social inequality. Some women face barriers to the full moral and social recognition of motherhood (e.g., Collins, 2000; Edin & Kafalis, 2005; Lewin, 1993; Zinn & Dill, 1994).

In the age of mass incarceration and the War on Drugs, more parents are incarcerated than ever before. Women are the fastest growing population of prisoners since 2010 (Glaze & Kaeble, 2014). Incarcerated women also are more likely than incarcerated men to have children. Approximately 62% of the over 200,000 incarcerated women in the United States are mothers (Glaze & Maruschuk, 2008). They are also more likely to have custody of their children prior to incarceration and to lack male partners to care for their children during incarceration (Mumola, 2000; Schafer & Dellinger, 1999). Thus, the burden—and the stigma—of parenting in prison falls predominantly on women. Yet, our knowledge of how mothers manage this burden is limited.

Convicted felons suffer a “spoiled identity” (Goffman, 1963), often enduring what Garfinkel (1956) called “degradation ceremonies:” public rituals that mark the transition to a lower status. For incarcerated mothers, the transition from law-abiding citizen/mother to convicted felon can be especially harsh, as mothers have been defined as the moral backbone of society (Warner, 2005), whose fall from grace implies a severely damaged or depraved character (Rafter, 1992). Incarcerated mothers are by no means the only stigmatized group of mothers, but they are among the most marginalized women in society. This marginality, combined with the stigma and shame of incarceration, “renders this powerless population essentially disposable in the eyes of society” (Allen, Flaherty, & Ely, 2010, p. 162). Incarcerated mothers respond to social condemnation in different ways, but the stigma weighs heavily on all of them. This stigma has consequences for mothers’ ability to reintegrate into society (Garcia, 2016), and reflects on their identity as mothers after release (Sharpe, 2015).

While Davis (1997) argues that felons are criminalized in part because they are seen as *incapable* of



being good mothers (see also Chesney-Lind, 1997), even the most marginalized individuals in society work to salvage spoiled identities (e.g., Snow & Anderson, 1987). Many incarcerated mothers engage in oppositional identity work to challenge the stigma that they are “bad” mothers who neglect their children (e.g., Allen, Flaherty, & Ely, 2010; Barnes & Stringer, 2014; Ferraro & Moe, 2003). Oppositional identity work involves “transform[ing] discrediting identities into crediting ones and redefining those identities so they can be seen as indexes of noble rather than flawed character” (Schwalbe & Mason-Schrock, 1996, p.141). For incarcerated women with children, doing oppositional identity work can be a deterrent from violating jail rules, a way to cope with the pain and emptiness of day-to-day life in jail, and a source of hope for the future (Martin 1997; Showers, 1993). But oppositional identity work does not just help women cope with incarceration. It can also enable them to translate identities as good mothers who love and care for their children into their lives post-release (Bui and Morash, 2010; O’Brien 2001).

### Literature Review

Our literature review consists of two parts. First, we review the literature examining how individuals construct moral identities in the face of stigma. Second, we review research on how mothers in particular negotiate stigma in their attempts to reconstitute motherhood as a source of moral worth.

#### Constructing Moral Identities in the Face of Stigma

With the exceptions of Goffman (1961) and Sykes (2007/1958), moral identity scholars have ignored incarcerated persons. However, research demonstrates that individuals struggle to create moral identities under even the most dehumanizing conditions. Scholars have examined how higher-status groups negotiate what Goffman (1963) calls the “courtesy stigma” stemming from their association with stigmatized groups (e.g., Fields, 2001; McQueeney, 2009; Ueno & Gentile, 2015). In their study of correctional officers (COs), Tracy, Myers, and Scott (2007) show how the COs they studied dealt with the stigma of working with prison inmates, who are widely seen as “deviant human rubbish” (Davis, 1998). The COs challenged the stigma of the “scum of law enforcement” by claiming that no one else could do their jobs, emphasizing the dangerous parts of their job as the most desirable (e.g., they prided themselves on being “assholes every day” and the “most-hated officers”), and blaming inmates for being “stupid,” “lazy,” “liars,” and “fuckin’ nuts.” The COs did not face a stigma by virtue of their own actions, but by *courtesy* of the population they worked with. In response, they drew on the resources at their disposal to restore a sense of moral identity and virtue in their work.

Research also shows how disadvantaged and socially unpopular groups claim a sense of moral worth in the face of stigma (e.g., Sandstrom, 1990; Schneider, 1988; Snow & Anderson, 1987; Wolkomir, 2001). Studies of incarcerated mothers (Allen, Flaherty, & Ely, 2010; Barnes & Stringer, 2014; Enos, 2001; Ferraro & Moe, 2003) demonstrate that motherhood is a source of self-worth for women *and* a source of stigma. Yet, incarcerated mothers do not simply accept this stigma. Some incarcerated women justify committing larceny or selling drugs as attempts to provide for their children, thereby transforming criminal behaviors into evidence of their commitment to their children and claiming a moral identity as mothers (Ferraro & Moe, 2003; Hunter & Greer, 2011). Others look to the future and their eventual performance of “good motherhood” to help bolster their identity as mothers. The incarcerated mothers in Stringer’s (2009) study acknowledged that their past behaviors caused their children pain, but looked forward to mothering their children upon release. One woman spoke of how she comforted her son: “this will pass. We’re gon’ (sic) be out there playing ball and football, so don’t give up” (2009, p.341). Enck and McDaniel (2015) found that the hope of having more children bolstered women’s identity during incarceration, even if they had performed poorly as mothers in the past. These studies show that individuals have agency to shape and reshape what it means to be a mother through the personal meanings they attach to that identity (Gatrell, 2005) and their social interactions within specific historical, cultural, and institutional contexts (Glenn, 1994).

With more Americans—including mothers—incarcerated than any other time in history (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008; Guerino, Harrison & Sabol, 2012), the penal system has a significant influence on the structure and content of familial relationships. Research has demonstrated the effects of incarceration on the wives and girlfriends of incarcerated men (Comfort, 2008), children of the incarcerated (Johnston & Gabel, 1995; Siegel, 2011), and caregivers of incarcerated parents’ children (Bernstein, 2005; Katz, 1998). However, incarcerated mothers themselves are understudied. We seek to fill this gap by analyzing how incarcerated mothers

claim moral identities in the face of stigma.

### **Motherhood as a Moral Identity**

“Mother” is perhaps the most criticized and revered social identity in our society. Mothers are deeply valued, but closely scrutinized for their choices and circumstances. Many scholars have argued that the cultural expectations of motherhood place women in a bind (Blair-Loy, 2003; Crittenden, 2001; Hays, 1996). Hays (1996) coined the term “intensive mothering” to describe the impossible expectations placed on mothers in our society. On the one hand, intensive mothering demands personally selfless, financially expensive, and emotionally consuming caregiving. On the other hand, economic realities demand that most women work for pay outside the home and cannot devote endless time, money, and energy to satisfying their children’s every need and want. While intensive mothering is not widely practiced—even by the affluent white women for whom it might be the most feasible—it is “the most powerful, visible, and self-consciously articulated” ideology of mothering in the United States (Hays, 1996, p. 21).

Additionally, mothers from diverse racial/ethnic and class backgrounds may embrace different ideals of what it means to be a good mother. For example, Collins (2000) argues that motherhood is especially valued in black communities. Segura (1994) shows that many Mexican immigrant mothers do not perceive a conflict between paid work and motherhood. In her study of a diverse group of working mothers, Christopher (2012) found that contemporary mothers rejected the contradictions of “intensive mothering” (Hays 1996) that positioned paid work as antithetical to good motherhood and incorporated decision-making (if not intensive caregiving) into a way of mothering that made sense for them. Many poor women, across race, value “being there” for their children—being attentive and keeping them safe rather than being a “supermom” (Edin & Kefalas, 2005; Elliot & Haseltine, 2013). Dow (2016) finds that middle and upper-class women expect to work outside the home and use kin and kith to care for children. Scholars argue there is no universal ideology of mothering (e.g., Baca Zinn & Dill, 1994), but the expectation to be a “good mother”—however that is defined within a culture or group—appears to transcend social differences. However, far from being a romanticized moral status or experience, motherhood is saturated by social differences and inequalities.

Even so, motherhood can be a valuable source of moral worth for women who have children. Enos (2001) and Hairston (1999; 2002) point out that social acknowledgement and privileges typically accompany the mother role. Edin & Kefalas (2005) argue that for women who have little access to middle-class markers of success, such as career and home ownership, caring for children is an important source of moral identity. Baker & Carson (1999) find that despite severe social disapprobation, substance-abusing women do not necessarily see themselves as “bad mothers.” The women in their study considered themselves good mothers when they met their children’s basic needs, shielded children from their drug use, and used drugs strategically to manage stress. In this study, we ask three key questions: how do incarcerated women challenge the stigma they face as “bad mothers?” What resources do they draw on to craft moral identities as “good mothers” under conditions of extreme social control? What are the consequences of these strategies for women’s rehabilitation and reentry?

### **Setting**

Northeast Jail was a relatively small facility, designed to hold 962 prisoners, located in the northeastern United States. At the time of fieldwork, it housed approximately 150 women and 1450 men. Only pre-trial offenders and those sentenced to two-and-a-half years or less were housed there. The average sentence at Northeast Jail was six months. The interior was austere, with muted paint colors and clearly stenciled cell numbers on the walls. It had industrial-style stairs and railings, with mostly-metal furniture bolted to the floor. The living space had a few very small windows in the two outer corners of the main space (referred to as “the pod”) and one in each of the cells. The lights were fluorescent, and the air was stale. The physical space of the jail gave little indication that motherhood and children were important, but therapeutic groups and classes<sup>1</sup>, counseling meetings, and daily conversations often revolved around women’s children and motherhood.

Researchers have long overlooked jails in favor of prisons (Irwin, 1985; Klofas, 1990; Richie, 1996). But as Klofas (1990, p. 69) writes, “the jail touches more people’s lives than does any other form of correctional service.” Thirty times more people rotate through jails than prisons each year (Richie, 1996), and the

number of people incarcerated in jails has increased steadily over the past two decades (Sturges & Al-Khattar, 2009). Approximately 60% of women at Northeast Jail were serving sentences for drug possession or sales, 30% for property crimes such as writing bad checks and identity theft, and about 10% for violent crimes such as assault and battery. The pattern of offending among women at Northeast Jail was similar to patterns of female criminality in the U.S. overall.

The facility's status as a jail had implications for our study of incarcerated motherhood. Short sentences often meant that mothers were away from their children for short periods of time, and many intended to resume full-time parenting upon release. Researchers cite mother-child visitation as an important reinforcement of family relationships that is seriously lacking in the penal system (Michalsen, Flavin, & Krupat, 2010). In state and federal prisons for women—which are usually located in rural areas far from women's homes—visitation is difficult, expensive, and rare (Laughlin, Arrigo, Blevins, & Coston, 2008; Tewksbury & DeMichelle, 2005). Yet, most of the women housed at Northeast Jail were from neighboring cities and towns. This meant that some mothers saw their children somewhat frequently. For other mothers, however, the obstacles of transportation, caregiver work schedules, and caregiver relationships were insurmountable even though children were nearby. Thus, there was variation in how access to visitation and contact with children shaped incarcerated women's identities as mothers.

### Methods

Prior to conducting research, Aiello obtained permission to conduct this research from Northeast Jail before undergoing a full IRB review at her university. Northeast Jail required an application and two meetings with administrators who offered suggestions for interview questions, but were otherwise hands-off regarding the details of the project. Per the university IRB, interview subjects signed an informed consent form and were provided with a copy for their records with contact information for the university IRB should they have questions about the study. In order to protect confidentiality, all interview recordings and transcripts were kept in the researcher's possession, with names and identifying information kept in a separate, locked file-cabinet.

Aiello conducted 83 interviews with mothers at Northeast Jail. Interview subjects were proportionate to the overall racial/ethnic makeup of the jail: 43% white, 20% black, and 36% Latina. The average age was 32, and mothers had an average of three children. The mothers in this study had varied mothering careers and varying access to their children during their incarceration.<sup>2</sup> Forty-one mothers lived with their children prior to incarceration, and another 15 did not live with their children, but had regular contact with them. Twelve mothers had no contact prior to their incarceration, and 17 had some, irregular contact<sup>3</sup>. Those who had caregivers willing and able to bring the children to the jail on Saturday mornings were able to participate in a weekly, 90-minute visitation program for mothers and children. This visit was significant because it was the only contact visit in the facility; all other visits took place "through the glass," with prisoners and their visitors speaking through a phone. Approximately half of the mothers in this study saw their children on a regular, weekly basis through the visitation program. Twelve of the mothers had no visitation with their children.

Interviews ranged from 30 minutes to two hours, with an average of one hour. They were audio-recorded and fully transcribed. In addition, Aiello spent 750 hours conducting participant observation at Northeast Jail—attending visitations, participating in groups and classes, observing counseling, staff, and attorney meetings, facilitating phone calls between incarcerated women and their families, visiting women when they gave birth in outside hospitals, and otherwise hanging out an average of three days per week. Motherhood was a primary topic of concern and discussion in all of these arenas. Detailed field notes were recorded from memory after each visit to the jail.

Data were coded and analyzed using initial coding, memoing, and focused coding (Charmaz, 2006). In the initial coding, both authors reviewed the interview transcripts independently to identify broad categories that emerged from the data. For example, both authors coded the original main themes (e.g., women's first-time motherhood, the circumstances surrounding their arrest and incarceration, their feelings about the caregivers of their children, visitation, jail programming, staff, and fellow prisoners) and certain parts of the interview transcripts that captured women's talk about motherhood. In this process, we found that the women routinely highlighted motherhood as a source of moral identity.

The process also involved memoing (e.g., working collaboratively using Google Docs) to identify



the strategies through which the women claimed moral identities in the face of stigma (i.e., essentializing motherhood, choosing motherhood). In this iterative, collaborative process, we alternated between coding and memoing to ascertain more detailed moral claims (e.g., distancing and embracing) (Lofland & Lofland, 1995). Collaborative memoing enabled us to respond to each other's thoughts in a timely manner as we unpacked the subtleties in mothers' moral identity management strategies. Once we identified initial themes and codes, we re-read the interviews and memoed together more intensively. For example, we discovered that mothers were distancing themselves from each other *and* from their own past behaviors (e.g., drug use). While these strategies seemed quite different at first, memoing helped us to see that the women were using both forms of distancing to claim moral identities as mothers. Finally, we used focused coding to develop more detailed moral claims. For instance, focused coding helped us to develop the analysis in regards to self-sacrifice. We found that mothers spoke about self-sacrifice when they talked about their lives before their incarceration, during it, and in the future, but that it took on particular meaning when they spoke about self-sacrifice in regards to visitation. Mothers talked about their willingness to forego visitation for the sake of their children, a practice that we analyzed as a form of embracing incarcerated motherhood.

We treated the mothers' narratives as "identity talk" (Snow & Anderson, 1987) or moral identity "claims" (Goffman, 1963). In short, we did not analyze the mothers' narratives as objective accounts of their experiences, but rather as rhetorical attempts to claim moral identities as mothers. This enabled us to analyze how incarcerated women talked about themselves as good mothers in the face of intense stigma and within conditions of extreme social control in jail.

### Findings

Below, we discuss our findings. In the first section, we provide a backdrop for how Northeast Jail—a setting of extreme social control and degradation—nevertheless provided the women with resources to re-envision themselves as good mothers. In the second section, we analyze the strategies by which the women constructed moral identities.

#### Jail as a Setting for the Construction of Moral Identities

In struggling to cope with the stigma of incarceration, mothers at Northeast Jail engaged in oppositional identity work. In the eyes of their families, communities, and society at large, they had not just violated the law, but neglected their children (Katz, 1998). When Becky<sup>4</sup>, a mother of three, was asked if she had gone to counseling before jail, she replied: "I never thought I needed it. I thought I was just a normal mom like everybody else, but normal moms don't beat up on their kids...so I figured I ain't a normal mom." For Becky and others, being in jail threatened their self-concept as mothers. Yet, as Goffman (1963) notes, jail can also offer a "moral experience"—a dramatic transformation in the ways people evaluate their and others' moral worth. For many of these mothers, jail was a turning point wherein new moral identities were constructed.

The mothers in this study deployed the resources available to them in the total institution (Goffman, 1961) of jail to construct moral identities. Although dominant constructions cast incarcerated women as "bad" mothers—and being in jail undoubtedly made it difficult for women to parent their children—jail offered time, space, and (limited) tools for women to renegotiate dominant meanings of motherhood. Having been, to a greater or lesser extent, uprooted from their social moorings, incarcerated mothers found themselves *liminal persona*: people who are "neither here nor there; [who are] betwixt and between the positions assigned by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial" (Turner, 1969, p. 95). Like others in a liminal status (see Sandstrom, 1990), incarcerated women were driven to make sense of, and at times challenge, the "spoiled" (Goffman, 1963) features of their identities.

Incarcerated mothers drew on the roles, networks, discourses, and ideologies of jail to do oppositional identity work and construct identities as good mothers. The formal programming and everyday culture of Northeast Jail provided incarcerated mothers with two contradictory messages that facilitated their construction of moral identities: motherhood as a choice and motherhood as biological. First, the crux of Northeast Jail's rehabilitative programming was an ideology of "choice" and "empowerment," which pinned the blame on the women themselves (Aiello, 2013). Echoing the findings of other scholars who have studied women's penal facilities (Enos, 2001; Hannah-Moffat, 2001; McCorkel, 2013), the discourse of empowerment labeled drug addiction, involvement with unsavory men, crime, and incarceration as women's *choice*. For mothers, the



implication was that they chose to abandon their children.

While this message was typically implicit, there were moments when staff and prisoners explicitly charged incarcerated women with bad motherhood. Almost daily staff or prisoners reiterated some version of, “You weren’t thinking of your kids when you were in the streets,” to admonish women who cried or showed concern for their children. Grant, who conducted intake interviews with new prisoners as part of her job, explained, “A lot of them say they did not have good parents. Now their parents are raising their kids.” She added, “I don’t get it. I have two kids,” implying that she would never leave her children with inadequate caregivers. The rhetoric of choice enabled the comparison between Grant’s motherhood—as a white, middle-class, married woman with a solid career—to that of the predominantly disadvantaged women at Northeast Jail. This oversimplified explanation of how these women landed in jail (“they chose to”) impugned the women’s motherhood, while denying the social inequalities that shaped their lives.

Yet, the jail-based rhetorics of “choice” and “empowerment” also motivated many of these women to restore their dignity and worth as mothers. Jail ideologies gave women a language to talk about what they wanted and envisioned for their future as mothers. In articulating their commitment to motherhood, they reclaimed a moral identity as mothers that accommodated their new circumstances. Indeed, motherhood is one of the only positive sources of social recognition and status available to incarcerated women (Enos, 2001; Hairston, 1999; 2002).

Second, the staff framed motherhood as a biological status that could not be rescinded by incarceration, termination of parental rights, or even death. Parenting class was one jail-based forum in which biological notions of motherhood were emphasized, even though the official curriculum was rooted in choice and “concerted cultivation” (Lareau, 2003) style child-rearing strategies. The parenting class instructor often described motherhood as a natural phenomenon created by God: “45,000 fish are in sperm. Only you made it to be born. There is a reason why you were the one.” She argued that the birth process created an unbreakable bond between mother and child:

No matter what, your kids will always love you and trust you. They know who you are. Even if you have a baby and it...gets adopted by someone else, that child will always know that something’s not quite right...and maybe when they’re 18 they’ll try to figure it out.

The biological understanding of motherhood reinforced the moral identity of some mothers, but limited women’s access to other sources of self-worth, like vocational and educational training that might enable them to support themselves and their children after release. Such training was sorely needed for women with limited education and job skills. While the men at Northeast Jail had access to ten different vocational programs, only two of those programs were open to women. Community college courses available to incarcerated males were also off-limits for women. The jail staff justified this inequity by arguing that there were not enough women to constitute a full college class, and men and women could not be permitted to take classes together. However, men and women were allowed to work together in two income-generating programs at Northeast Jail: a graphic-design program that produced brochures and other promotional items, and a manufacturing program that produced goods that were used both at the jail and sold to other penal facilities. In contrast, almost all the other programming for women was therapeutic and focused on motherhood. This was further important because biological understandings helped jail staff to use motherhood as a mechanism of social control. Prisoner behavior was seen as a reflection of women’s commitment to motherhood. Only women who followed jail rules and actively participated in programming were viewed as committed to their children.

Sue’s experience shows how prisoner behavior was grounds for mother-blaming. Sue was sent to segregation for getting into a verbal tiff with a correctional officer; she was also banned from visiting her infant son. She incited the ire of the counseling staff, who chastised her for lacking a commitment to her child. A staff member yelled at Sue: “You’re a mother now! You need to learn how to act.” The staff simultaneously essentialized motherhood and rebuked Sue for failing to make the right choices. Sue’s *choice* to “mouth-off” to a correctional officer, and suffer the loss of her visit, violated the social expectations of motherhood. Even though Sue spent her days locked up and separated from her son, she was beholden to the mandate that mothers should put their children at the center of all their decisions and actions. Here, and in other situations, jail staff used both rhetorics (choice and essentializing) to demean and control incarcerated women. Yet, as we

will show, women capitalized on these same rhetorics to challenge the stigma associated with incarceration and build “good mother” identities.

The incarcerated mothers we studied found strength, pride, and self-worth in motherhood (see also Barnes & Stringer, 2014; Enos, 2001; Shamai & Kochal, 2008). As Marlene, a mother of five, said of the incarcerated mothers at Northeast Jail, “We don’t have a career or anything. We take pride in our mothering.” For these incarcerated women, motherhood was both a source of stigma and a foundation upon which they built moral identities. As such, this study moves beyond binary notions of motherhood as either oppressive or liberating to show how incarcerated women both resisted and reinforced stigmatizing discourses around incarcerated motherhood at Northeast Jail and society at large.

### Strategies for Constructing Moral Identities

The women at Northeast jail utilized two key strategies for constructing moral identities: distancing and embracing the stigma of “incarcerated mother.”

**Distancing from “incarcerated mother.”** The majority of mothers *distanced* themselves from the identity of “incarcerated mother.” They did this in two ways: by “separating mother/addict selves” and/or talking about motherhood as a “choice.” Their liminal status—i.e., they were neither full-time mothers nor prisoners who had relinquished the role of mother—gave incarcerated mothers some freedom to redefine themselves. Certainly, they had to manage the stigma associated with their crimes, motherhood, and incarceration. But the ambiguity of their position also allowed them to draw on a multitude of (at times contradictory) notions of what it meant to be a mother and incarcerated woman in order to remake themselves as virtuous mothers.

**Separating mother/addict selves.** For mothers with long-term drug addictions, essentializing motherhood helped them manage the stigma of substance abuse and the associated behaviors (e.g., neglect) that threatened their identities as good mothers. These women argued that their true potential as mothers was realized when they were not using drugs or alcohol. Other times they invoked the rehabilitative language of the jail to position themselves as good mothers because they wanted to get and stay clean for their children. In either case, they separated their addict selves from their *true mother selves*.

Most mothers said that jail did not make it easier to be mothers to their children. For some, though, being in jail gave them a sense of clarity they had been unable to achieve “on the streets” and under the influence of drugs. Kimberly said that coming to jail had saved her life, and also made her feel like a good mother: “It’s weird because I get this perception that I’m a good mother because I’m clean. And I have a different attitude, different goals. How do I say it...I feel like I can comfort her more, even over the phone, than I could two weeks ago.” Like the substance-abusing mothers in Shumai and Koshal’s (2008) study, Jane said that she felt like more of a mother in jail than on the streets:

When I’m out there, I’m not a mom. I’m not a sister. I’m not a daughter. I’m not an aunt. I’m just a drug addict, full-fledged. I can show love when I’m sober. When I’m messed up, I can’t even love myself.

Beth was also addicted to heroin, but unlike Jane, she was the primary caregiver of her young daughter: “I always thought I was a good mother, ‘cause I was there. She never wanted for anything.” Through parenting classes and counseling at Northeast Jail, Beth came to believe that her drug addiction prevented her from being fully present for her daughter:

It was like a slap in the face because she didn’t have my whole heart, you know what I mean? Subconsciously, a part of me was focused on the drugs. So even when I was there, I wasn’t there with her, you know, mentally, emotionally. So that is kind of neglect, in a way.

Incarceration gave Kimberly, Jane, and Beth “clean time” that allowed them to get in touch with their “true” feelings about their children and motherhood. While incarceration was the vehicle that made this transformation possible, talk about sobriety as true motherhood distanced these mothers from the self that used drugs and became incarcerated. Clean, the women were able to claim a moral identity that was lost or fractured when drugs hindered their ability to be fully there for their children.

Women also claimed a moral identity through their efforts to get and stay clean. One of the catchphrases at Northeast Jail was “do you,” meaning that jail was a time for women to focus on themselves, take care of their problems, and stay out of trouble and each other’s business. Cassie utilized this rhetoric when asked if there was anything staff could do to make it better for her as an incarcerated mother:

No. Not right now. I got to fix myself, pretty much. It’s all about me. It’s got to be about me first. And all that that people say kids come first, but me as an addict, I got to fix my addiction before I can be a mother.

While the dominant rhetoric surrounding motherhood and drug addiction suggested that women who used drugs did not love their children, statements like Cassie’s effectively transformed fighting addiction into good mothering. Tatiana offered the counterpoint that addiction and love for children are not mutually exclusive: “Who would go through nine months and the ordeal of labor, only to not love your child? It’s a mother’s instinct to love their baby. It’s just that drugs intervene and come between them.”

**Talking about motherhood as a choice.** Just as crack-using mothers have been portrayed as irresponsible women who love drugs more than their children (Roberts, 1999, p. 156), the incarcerated mothers at Northeast Jail strove to cast off the stigma of “not caring” about their children. As liminal individuals, incarcerated mothers had “no status, insignia, secular clothing, rank, kinship position, nothing to demarcate them structurally from their fellows” (Turner, 1967, p. 98). The inability to differentiate themselves from the group was a source of considerable anxiety for mothers who struggled against the stigma of assumed drug use, selfishness, and bad motherhood that accompanied the “choice” rhetoric at Northeast Jail. As a result, they sought to differentiate themselves from other incarcerated mothers. Some women did this by talking about motherhood as a “choice.”

The mothers in this study dissociated themselves from others by engaging in what Schwalbe, Godwin, Holden, Schrock, Thompson, & Wolkomir (2000) call “defensive othering.” Defensive othering is “identity work done by those seeking membership in a dominant group, or by those seeking to deflect the stigma they experience as members of a subordinate group” (Schwalbe et al., 2000, p. 425). It involves accepting the “devalued identity imposed by the dominant group, but then saying in effect, ‘There are indeed Others to whom this applies, but it does not apply to me’” (p. 425). At Northeast Jail, the choice rhetoric allowed women to defensively “other”—and define themselves as better mothers than—their fellow incarcerated mothers.

Some mothers bristled against the perception that all incarcerated women were addicted to drugs. Marlene did not feel that Northeast Jail was preparing her for life on the outside because “everything is based on an addiction. I’m not an addict, [but] I have real frickin’ problems like you do when you go home.” Colleen strongly criticized the women who purchased the drugs she sold. She justified why her marijuana use was different than other women’s use of harder drugs:

I can’t be like, ‘oh, we’re the same type of woman’ because we’re not. If it came down to me smoking or selling my ass, I would not. I just wouldn’t smoke. That’s not an option. You’re degrading yourself as a woman, a mother, as anything.

Abby believed that staff should consider the situations of individual women: “Just don’t think automatically when you see us that we’re drug addicts.” Deeply ensconced in Abby’s frustration at being thought of as an addict was her belief that women who use and sell drugs are not good mothers:

It pisses me off sometimes, because...I never sold drugs, but I live in the neighborhood...and I see you and you’re never with your kids. You can be out of touch for years and...then you want to come here and cry about them?...It gets me frustrated because, how can you live without your kids?

Although Abby parroted the dominant view that mothers who “live without” their children are bad mothers, she applied it to life on the streets, not to life in jail. In jail, she was one of the group: a mother who committed a crime that led to separation from her son. Her claims to good motherhood rested on “othering” the women who sold and used drugs on the outside—those who were not with their children when they could (and should) have been. In contrast, Abby positioned herself as a mother who was with her son before her incarceration and *would be* with him if she were free, but the choice was not hers to make at that point.

Like many penal facilities, Northeast Jail was a “revolving door” (Harris, 2015), with many of the

same women returning again and again on charges related to addiction, mental illness, and poverty. Most women's sentences were relatively short (one year or less). Camille and Becky, each serving two-year sentences, were exceptions. Both were exasperated by what they saw as other women's lack of desire to stop doing the same things that had landed them in jail in the first place. Camille had seen many of her fellow prisoners return multiple times: "Most of them who say they're not coming back? I'll see you in a couple of months. I give up. I'm not even going to be mad at you, because you just want to keep doing it." Becky reiterated a common trope about mothers who claim to miss their children:

I see a lot of girls that go and come back out and every time they come back they wanna cry about their kids, but...then they're...back two weeks later? They really don't care.

The rhetoric of choice helped these mothers differentiate themselves from the group (and its associated stigma) when they accounted for other women's return to jail as something those women *wanted*. Camille's "you just want to keep doing it" and Becky's "they really don't care" bolstered their identities as mothers who do care, despite their incarceration.

The mothers in this study also used the choice rhetoric to define themselves as mothers who planned a better future for themselves and their children because they were taking advantage of jail programming and putting their children first. Danielle felt that mothers who did not take the jail's parenting class were not genuinely invested in their children: "Some of them didn't do the parenting group, but yet they talk about 'oh I love my kids,' 'oh I miss my kids.' Don't you think it's important that you get involved with parenting groups so you can be better?" Rhonda's daughter had been in the custody of her mother for several years due to Rhonda's repeated incarcerations. Yet, Rhonda argued that women should make the most of what the jail has to offer: "Even though none of us were really thinking of our kids when we came here—obviously we were doing what we wanted to do, period—but now that we are in here, I feel that we should benefit from being here." Further, Rhonda intimated that women who did not follow the rules of the jail were not good mothers. Rhonda commented on mothers who had lost their visits due to penal violations:

You know you have your kid's visit coming up that day, so you should be on your best behavior. Just suck up everything. I mean, if somebody calls you a bitch, just get over it. What's more important? Them calling you a bitch, or you getting to see your kids?

These mothers expressed the belief that good mothering is putting children first: good mothers always think about how their actions will affect their children. At Northeast Jail, being a good parent was largely reduced to a matter of individual choice. Those who wanted to see their children, address their issues with substance abuse, and achieve personal growth were seen as more likely to be good mothers.

### **Embracing "Incarcerated Mother"**

A smaller group of mothers at Northeast Jail transformed incarceration from a mark of shame to a badge of moral authority. These women viewed jail as a "moral experience" (Goffman, 1961), or a life lesson that clarified their priorities and empowered them to be better mothers. While the majority of mothers used distancing strategies to deflect the stigma of incarceration, some mothers embraced their situation—they built identities as especially committed, selfless, and worthy mothers *because* they had overcome the pain of separation from their children and made something positive of it. As Snow and Anderson (1987) defined it in their study of homeless men, embracement is the "verbal and expressive confirmation of one's acceptance of and attachment to the social identity associated with a general or specific role, a set of social relationships, or a particular ideology" (p. 1354). Embracing the identity of incarcerated mother allowed these women to reformulate the stigma of incarceration and integrate it with valued definitions of self. The women at Northeast Jail embraced the identity of incarcerated mother by highlighting the hardships involved and by treating it as a growth-experience that granted them wisdom to be better mothers in the future.

***Incarcerated motherhood as hardship and self-sacrifice.*** First, these mothers contended that the experience of mothering from behind bars epitomized a special commitment to and appreciation for their children. Camille reflected:

It's hard to be a mother while you're in jail, a lot of people think it's impossible. It's not impossible. My dedication always was, and is ...I'll do anything for my kids, but I appreciate them a lot more.



The little things that used to aggravate me, now I find to be cute.

Camille maintained that, while she had always been committed to her children, jail made her a better mother because she was now more patient with and appreciative of her children. When asked if jail made her feel differently about being a mother, Ava said, "It's hard, it really is...Like right now, it's summer time, they're on summer vacation. I wonder what they're doing, where they went." Ava stressed that separation from her children heightened her desire to be with her kids. Unlike mothers who distanced themselves from the stigma of incarceration, Camille and Ava embraced it as an experience that strengthened their moral identities as mothers. In fact, jail made them value motherhood more deeply.

Several women also positioned their own mothering as superior to their children's caregivers, in their own eyes and the eyes of their children. Natalie said: "I was very upset about a lot of things [with her parents as caregivers] but I couldn't do nothing about it, so I just tell my kids don't worry, I'll be home [soon]. It's not even that [my parents] are being hard. It's just that that's not how I would do it." Sabrina talked about negotiating caregiving with her mother, who had guardianship of her two daughters:

It's a little bit touchy because I don't want her to feel like I'm coming down on her for things that were done with me and my brothers that I don't want done, or I want done differently. Like we didn't talk about our feelings. Everything was always ok. We knew we were loved, but we weren't really hugged, or we weren't really told we were loved.

Sabrina felt a conflict: she was grateful for her mother's willingness to care for her children, but concerned about her mother's parenting style. Somewhat ironically, this conflict allowed her to define herself as a *better* mother than her own mom. Colleen, too, defined herself as a better mother than her sister, who had taken her children in, when she said: "When you call 'em they're like 'I miss you. I love you.' That's so good. I don't know how my sister would feel. They don't tell her that." By differentiating their own mothering from the family members (mothers and sister) who were now caring for their children, Natalie, Sabrina, and Colleen claimed a special role in their children's lives. In doing so, these women cemented moral identities as mothers whose presence was sorely missed and who were devoted to—and uniquely capable of—making life better for their children once they returned home.

Additionally, some women invoked the hardships of mothering from behind bars as evidence of their willingness to sacrifice their own needs for their children. The theme of self-sacrifice came up routinely in regards to mother-child visits. Pilar explained that visits were important to her, but it was up to her children whether or not they attended: "I will not make them come unless they're ready for it, you know. Like if it's hard for them to come and see me and go away and leave me behind, I wouldn't let them come." Linda found the process of visitation too frightening for her children: "The hallway, that long hallway, and then they were walking down and they were crying. I was like, Christ, I'll never put them through that again. And I didn't." For Pilar and Linda, the desire to protect their children from the anxiety of visiting them in jail outweighed their own "selfish" desire to see their children. Pilar and Linda's reflections on visitation reinforced their moral identities as mothers who put their children's well-being first.

Anna's six-year-old daughter had been out of her custody for close to a year. Per court order, her father brought her daughter to visit once a month. During visits, Anna observed that a distance had grown between them:

I feel that our relationship is deteriorating because we don't connect like we used to, you know. We just don't. In fact, last week, or the week before, when they did the visits, um, she asked me, "Mommy, why are all these kids crying? Why are all these Moms crying?" I said, "Because they miss one another." I said, "You don't miss me?" She said, "Yeah, but I'm not gonna cry about it."

The trajectory of her relationship with her daughter was very painful for Anna, but she accepted responsibility for the actions that led to the rift in their relationship. She demonstrated self-sacrifice by accepting the new reality of their relationship and pledging to make the best of it: "You know, what could I say? I couldn't say anything, I was really hurt, but I see that, you know, I caused this on myself. And now...all I can do is try to be the best parent I can be from here."

***Incarcerated motherhood as life lesson.*** Second, a few women highlighted the new parenting skills



and sense of moral authority they had gained from incarceration. While incarceration is typically associated with a loss of freedom and humanity (Sykes, 2007/1958), these women fashioned themselves as good, street-wise mothers *because* they were incarcerated. The mothers at Northeast Jail claimed a special mission to teach their children not to follow in their footsteps. In interviews, women repeatedly said they didn't want their children to make the same mistakes they did. Natalie spoke at length of how jail had "changed her as a mother":

One time my daughter says to me, when I get older, I want to smoke weed and cigarettes go to the club and shake my butt just like my mommy. And I laughed, I thought it was funny. But now, it's not funny. She's watching me. And I gotta...let her know that you don't wanna be like that. She could end up here.

Alyssa agreed that being in jail helped her to be a better mother. When her daughter shared that someone had offered her cocaine and that she had sex for the first time, Alyssa said, "No way. I don't want her following in my path." Similarly, Gladys presented the scenario: "If somebody said to him, 'Try this,' I want him to say, 'No, I'm not gonna try it 'cause my mom tried that and my mom was in jail.'" For Natalie, Alyssa, and Gladys, jail provided a new perspective, maturity, and real-world knowledge that helped them enact moral identities as role models and mothers to their children.

Nancy emphasized that her experience in jail inspired her to embrace a special mission as a mother and a teacher-protector of children. She described jail as:

a life experience I will never forget. So when I walk out...at least I'll have the experience to tell my child. I've been in jail and trust me. That's not a place you want to go.

Lily, too, embraced her identity as an incarcerated mother: "If I find my daughter doing things that led me to being here, I will let her know especially so she doesn't think that I'm just scolding her or lecturing her. I'm going to let her know that I was there and you don't want to go there." In contrast to mothers who "scold" or "lecture" their children, Lily vowed to use the hard-won lessons of jail to guide her daughter down the right path. Her moral identity was grounded not in holier-than-thou preaching, but in the front-lines of lived experience. In her view, this potentially shameful disruption in her mothering was a moral experience that made her a better mother. Her hope for the future lay in focusing on what she still had, not on what she had lost through incarceration.

## Discussion and Policy Recommendations

At the beginning of this article, we posed three research questions. One, how did the incarcerated women at Northeast Jail challenge the stigma of "bad mothers?" Two, what resources did they use to craft moral identities as "good mothers" under conditions of extreme social control? And three, what were the consequences of their strategies for rehabilitation and reentry?

First, in order to contextualize incarcerated women's moral identity management strategies, we must not forget that incarcerated women confront an intense stigma as "bad mothers." It was not that the mothers at Northeast Jail were innately bad or deficient. Rather, poverty, racial discrimination, trauma, and education were the pathways that led most of these women to Northeast Jail. Once labeled with a felony conviction, the most valued identity the women lost (and were trying to reclaim) was that of "mother" (see also Bachman et al., 2016; Sharpe, 2015). As policy debates shift from a "lock 'em up and throw away the key" approach to a more nuanced, research-based discussion about what works to discourage crime and facilitate re-entry (Mancini, Baker, Sainju, Golden, Bedard, & Gertz, 2015; Opsal, 2015), our findings shed light on how women manage incarcerated motherhood, both as a source of stigma and a moral identity. Insofar as most incarcerated women will be released, and many will return to parent their children, it is crucial that policymakers consider how the content and quality of mother/child relationships during incarceration affect women's sense of self, as mothers' self-concept is integral to the mother/child relationship and women's social reintegration post-release. These findings are also important for supporting children's future well-being, as the mother-child relationship during incarceration is crucial for children's emotional development, sense-of-self, and future relationships (Poehlmann, 2005; Poehlmann & Eddy, 2013; Smyth, 2012). However, we urge caution when incorporating children and motherhood into the incarceration experience because incarcerated women's motherhood can and has been used as a tool of punishment and control (Aiello, in press; Haney, 2013; Rafter, 1992).

Second, the women used two key strategies to craft moral identities: distancing from and embracing incarcerated motherhood. These strategies were powerfully restricted—and partially enabled—by their incarceration. We would argue that the distancing strategies did the most damage to incarcerated women. By focusing on moral identity rather than stigma, we seek to value incarcerated women's humanity and reveal subtleties in their identity-making processes that may be missed by a more negative focus on stigma (Schneider, 1988). Listening to the narratives of women in jail, we see that—far from feeling like “bad” mothers—these incarcerated women embraced motherhood as a valued identity. For many women at Northeast Jail, their liminal status provided some freedom to redefine themselves—a freedom to which the stigma framework may blind us. Indeed, the women's hopes for the future were predicated on what they saw as being a good mother—putting their children first, spending time with their children, and not taking their children for granted.

Third, these strategies had consequences for rehabilitation and reentry. The women's narratives speak to the limitations of moralizing motherhood. The challenges women face when they leave prison or jail are multi-fold. They struggle economically (Johnson, 2014), have trouble finding jobs (Harris & Kelly, 2005), and face limited options for securing safe, affordable housing (Petersilia, 2005). They have inadequate access to substance abuse and mental health programs during incarceration and after release (Bachman et al., 2016; Peugh & Belenko, 1999). While these obstacles are intertwined with women's lives as mothers, the jail's rhetoric around motherhood, addiction, and incarceration focused almost solely on whether or not mothers loved their children enough to make better choices. Without greater attention to the economic component of motherhood and better solutions to the problems of substance abuse and mental health for poor women, incarcerated women's moral identity work as mothers will be fruitless. Jail and prison programming must include high-quality GED programs, college education, and vocational training for incarcerated women. The antiquated assumption that women and their children will be supported by men only serves to undercut women's economic independence and successful reentry.

Our analysis of distancing and embracing strategies tells us that motherhood can operate as an invisible form of gendered punishment that many women experience during incarceration. As Welsh and Rajah (2014) argue, “feminist criminologists must be alert to the ways in which forms of invisible punishment continue to oppress and marginalize crime-processed women” (p. 323). Although suffering for motherhood is not a formal sentence, it is indeed part of the punishment for mothers who become incarcerated. While some scholars (e.g., Bloom, Owen, & Covington, 2004; Showers, 1993) argue that motherhood is linked to rehabilitation and that the penal system should provide more resources to help women sustain mother identities in jail, our findings urge caution. While motherhood can empower women to survive and thrive after prison, effective penal policy must acknowledge that motherhood is a help for some women's reentry, but a hindrance for others' (Michalsen, 2011). A singular focus on motherhood is not necessarily helpful for women.

Further, even as the strategies we discuss here did not vary by race, this does not mean that mothers' experiences prior to, during, or after incarceration are not racialized. Women's experiences are always shaped by race/ethnicity as a vector of identity in a racially stratified society (Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1991). We suggest that the relative homogeneity of moralizing strategies may be due to the dominance of the intensive mothering ideology (Hays, 1996) in the U.S. The white, middle-class model of motherhood that privileges solitary caregiving—putting children's needs first and an intense focus on children's desires and development—was seen in every interview in this study, despite the fact that none of the mothers were practicing it. The privileging of intensive mothering devalued other types of parenting that made incarcerated motherhood possible, like othermothering (Collins, 1994; Leverentz, 2011) and non-custodial mothering (Bemiller, 2005). The double-bind that characterizes mothering in the U.S. (Crittenden, 2001; Hays, 1996; Hochschild, 1997) was magnified at Northeast Jail, where women had virtually no access to the resources that would allow them to achieve the culturally-prescribed norms of good motherhood. Yet, they relied heavily on motherhood to make meaning of their lives and build moral identities.

### **Limitations and Directions for Future Research**

The U.S. has the highest incarceration rate in the world, and is a close second to Thailand in the incarceration of women (Walmsley, 2015). The U.S. demonstrates a notable disregard for incarcerated mothers and their children. For instance, the U.S. is one of the few nations that does not systematically allow mothers and

infants to reside together (Goshin & Byrne, 2009). The harsh treatment and over-incarceration of offenders in general, and women specifically, may factor into the stigmatization of drug- and criminal-justice-involved women in the U.S. Therefore, it would be reasonable to conclude that the strategies women in this study used to combat stigma are specific to the U.S. context.

Northeast Jail's status as a county jail is a strength of this study because jails are often understudied in favor of prisons. However, it could also be a limitation when considering how these findings might apply to incarcerated mothers held in state and federal prisons. Short sentences and the central location of Northeast Jail meant that many mothers in this study saw their children regularly and planned to reunite with them upon release. The low-level crimes that warranted short sentences also meant that mothers moved in and out of jail on a repetitive basis. It is reasonable to expect that mothers serving long sentences far away from their children would develop different coping mechanisms and strategies of identity management.

The personal and in-depth nature of ethnographic interviewing enabled us to capture women's narratives of incarcerated motherhood. Yet, generalizability is limited, especially since only one penal facility was studied. A mixed-methods approach incorporating survey or other quantitative data would enable researchers to generalize about how incarceration influences mothers' identity management. It is also important to identify how incarcerated mothers' identity-making strategies in jail help or hinder their lives post-release. To that end, future research should examine how women's experience of motherhood in jail/prison shapes their success after incarceration.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>Therapeutic groups and classes were described as voluntary by the staff, but successful completion of programming was closely tied to parole, so women had a considerable incentive to participate.

<sup>2</sup>Access to visitation during incarceration was not necessarily consistent with whether or not mothers were a significant part of their children's lives prior to incarceration.

<sup>3</sup>Numbers that add up to more than 83 can be accounted for by different living relationships between mothers and one or more children.

<sup>4</sup>All participants' names have been changed to protect their identities.

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**PRACTITIONER PAPER**

## **Breaking down barriers: Review of the implementation of an Inside/Out prison exchange program in a jail setting**

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**Abstract:** *The traditional criminal justice curriculum typically covers the three c's – cops, courts, and corrections. In addition, students can usually choose from a variety of discipline-related special topics courses to satisfy the requirements of their major or minor in criminal justice. However, what is missing from most curricula for future criminal justice professionals is face-to-face interaction with the very individuals they will spend a good part of their careers with – those who have been accused of or sentenced for law-breaking behaviors. The current paper describes the planning and implementation of an Inside Out Prison Exchange Course in a jail setting and offers an analysis of students' course evaluation to discuss the benefits of this educational experience. The results are intended to highlight the importance and benefit of non-traditional educational experiences for better criminal justice professionals and creating opportunities for viable reentry.*

**Key words:** *Inside-Out; Education; Criminal Justice; reentry*

“We need to be prepared to return to the outside world and stay there. But have hope for us when we're inside, too. We need opportunities to educate ourselves. My mother used to tell me something that obviously took me a long time to figure out: ‘How you think is how you act.’” John J. Lennon (2015)

### **Introduction**

The core of the traditional American criminal justice curriculum typically covers the three c's – cops, courts, and corrections. In addition, depending on the course offerings of the particular college or university, students can usually choose from a variety of discipline-related special topics courses to satisfy the requirements of their major or minor in criminal justice. However, what is missing from most curricula for future criminal justice professionals is face-to-face interaction with the very individuals they will spend a good part of their careers with – those who have been accused of or sentenced for law-breaking behaviors. Over the past decade, a teaching model called the Inside Out Prison Exchange has developed into a nationwide network with hundreds of courses in many correctional facilities and institutions of higher education as well as multiple trainings a year for interested instructors.

### **What is Inside Out?**

The Inside Out Prison Exchange Program<sup>1</sup> provides the opportunity for college students and incarcerated women and men to learn together as peers. Through interactive course sessions, including small and large group discussions and activities, students are given the chance to break down traditional in-group/out-group barriers that are anchored in many of our cultural beliefs regarding those who – for however long or whatever reason - reside on the inside. Most importantly, the course allows students to examine their life experiences in a different context and thus grow as individuals and scholars.

The overarching objective of courses taught in this model is to create a transformational education experience, both for students and instructors (see Boyd, 2013; Boyd & Myers, 1988; McLaren, 2015) that can-

<sup>1</sup> Detailed information can be found at <http://www.insideoutcenter.org/>



not be accomplished in a traditional university classroom. With an emphasis on collaboration and dialogue, ‘experts’ on both sides of the law learn with and from each other about pressing issues in criminal justice, and are thereby set in motion processes of social change and professional growth.<sup>2</sup>

Our specific Inside Out course was entitled “Myths and Realities of Crime and Criminal Justice.” The stated objectives of the course included providing an opportunity to break down barriers between the outside and the inside, to educate both inside and outside students on important criminal justice issues, and to learn about the causes of criminal behavior, the criminal justice system and process, as well as requisites for career choices. For the inside students, it was also our goal to provide an opportunity to experience a college environment: to consider college as a realistic option after release, to experience support and acceptance from the community. Finally, we hoped individuals would gain a better understanding of their own choices and the criminal justice system that was not completely tainted by their personal negative experience.

### **Why Inside Out?**

Criminal justice majors are pursuing their education to become professionals in the fields of law enforcement, corrections, and probation, as prosecutors, attorneys, or judges, to name but a few areas of expertise suited for graduates in this degree. Research consistently reveals that law enforcement is the top career aspiration among over half of all criminal justice majors (Johnson & White, 2002; Kelley, 2004; Krimmel & Tartaro, 1999). Tontodonato (2006) found that 51% of criminal justice majors in the sample planned a career in the criminal justice system, and 15% expected to go to law school. In their professional capacity, criminal justice majors will interact with individuals who break the law, are on trial, on probation, on parole, or incarcerated for their involvement in criminal behavior. Except during some internships, most of our conventional college students never get a chance to interact extensively with the population to which they plan to devote their professional careers. The Inside Out experience thus offers a unique opportunity for future criminal justice professionals to familiarize themselves with the “other,” and to learn through first-hand experiences and interactions the many ways in which criminal justice can be improved for both sides. In a review of her own Inside Out course, McLaren (2015: 372) found, “Students typically move from an ‘us versus them’ [...] orientations to a strong sense of community and appreciation for each other.”

Benefits are not limited to the outside students though. The population currently incarcerated in the United States surpassed 2.2 million in 2013 (Glaze & Kaeble, 2014) and the large majority will be back in the community after having served their sentence. Research is very clear that in order for reentry to be viable for incarcerated individuals, more attention to several factors is warranted. Meaningful educational experiences, for example, have a powerful positive impact on the individual, including a marked increase in self-confidence, a transformation in the way the self is seen, a feeling of belonging, and the likelihood of becoming gainfully employed and staying out of trouble with the law (Torres & Fine, 2005). Participation in prison college courses has been linked to the development of personal agency and a sense of responsibility (Torres & Fine, 2005). The Inside Out model reaches beyond the traditional prison college course by actively involving members of the community the individuals will return to, which in our experience has contributed to an increase in mutual understanding and respect between individuals who otherwise would have likely never interacted outside their clearly defined roles (i.e., law enforcement/corrections and offenders/incarcerated).

In addition, employment has been determined to be a reliable predictor of reentry success (e.g., Lockwood et al., 2012). In order for the typically under-educated and often formally unskilled incarcerated individuals to find and maintain employment in a very competitive market in the community to which they return, many barriers must be overcome. Reentering individuals face social stigma as well as discrimination from potential employers (e.g., Fletcher, 2001; Petersilia, 2003; Rose, Clear, & Ryder, 2000). The effects of such stigma on employment and other areas essential to one’s wellbeing are well publicized in the literature (e.g., Freeman, 1987; Grogger, 1992; Nagin & Waldfogel, 1993; Pager, 2003; Sampson & Laub, 1993; Travis, Solomon, & Waul, 2001). However, according to Hirschfield and Piquero (2010) the stigma can be mitigated by personal familiarity. Put differently, positive and constructive interactions, such as those taking place in an Inside Out course, assist in transforming negative labels and perceptions (e.g., Snyder & Reysen, 2014).

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<sup>2</sup> More detailed information about the Inside Out Prison Exchange Program is available at <http://www.insideoutcenter.org/>



One way to diminish the “us versus them” attitudes is to allow individuals from the inside and the outside to engage in a shared learning experiences that creates a sense of community. Inside Out offers just such an opportunity, and the Inside Out class can accomplish both – education and integration – at the same time. Not only do inside students leave the class enlightened and more critically aware, they also leave knowing that at least some people on the outside are actively involved in improving the current system of criminal justice. As an added benefit, they might receive information on job opportunities to which they would not otherwise have access. Likewise, outside students receive career-relevant education while at the same time engaging with individuals who can give first-hand accounts of the issues that can render the system inefficient and unjust, thus giving future criminal justice professionals a heightened level of insight and knowledge in the areas that so urgently need to be addressed with regard to criminal justice reform in their own community. In order for such change to take place, it is imperative to include all stakeholders in the conversation and the process, as is typical in an Inside-Out course (e.g., Pompa, 2002; Starks et al., 2011).

### **Planning and Implementation of the Course**

The Inside Out Prison Exchange model incorporates many moving parts that do not always flow easily from traditional university instructional methods. Due to the populations and stakeholders involved, in our experience pitching and introducing the idea to the decision makers at both institutions required careful planning and much patience. The process of establishing the program discussed here started with the completion of the Inside Out Instructor training in the summer of 2012. One of the first big decisions that needed to be made was with regard to whether the class should be offered at a prison or jail<sup>3</sup>. Many Inside Out courses are held in prisons, which comes with some benefits. By design, prison populations are more permanent than jail populations, and the pool of potential inside students is bigger, allowing for more careful screening and selection. In our case, the closest state prison is over an hour’s drive from campus. Given that our average student works at least part-time while taking a full class load, the time commitment of such a drive was deemed untenable. In contrast, the Sheriff’s Office and county jail is only 20 minutes from campus, and existing working relationships made the introduction of the proposal much easier. In addition, we felt the needed to keep in mind that a good number of our students aspire to work for the local law enforcement, and it made sense to make connections and establish a good working relationship for their benefit. Thanks to my colleague’s extensive and longstanding relationship with the local sheriff’s office, we secured a meeting with the chief jailer at the adult detention center to pitch the idea of Inside Out.

While our proposal was met with seemingly supportive nods, it was clear that the idea to repeatedly bring outsiders into the facility for 16 weeks to learn in one room together with insiders was very much beyond the comfort zone of the officials in charge. After some reassurance and the provision of references (i.e., from wardens and officials of other correctional institutions in Georgia where Inside Out had been taught successfully), we eventually received the go-ahead to start with the next phase; implementation. However, we were clearly on trial for the first semester and had to make some concessions to smooth the way, such as the class time for the first semester (Friday nights 7-10 p.m.), meeting location (visitation room rather than inside the jail), and the selection of the inside students (work release rather than closed population).

Because university funding for the course was not secured until the very last minute, we had little time to advertise for participants the first two times we ran the course. Students had to complete an application that included questions about their personal and academic background as well as open-ended questions to assess their understanding of crime and criminal justice. We then conducted interviews with the initially selected students and sent acceptance notifications to those we chose to participate in the course.

The inside students were handpicked by the staff of the correctional facility. Because a course like the one we proposed was initially very much beyond the comfort zone of officials at the Sheriff’s office, most of our inside students were selected from a limited pool of work release residents and inmate workers. Due to the transitional nature of the jail population, it was challenging to find enough eligible inside students who were guaranteed to remain at the facility for the duration of our course (16 weeks). In order to get the desired 15 in-

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<sup>3</sup> In the USA, the difference between jails and prisons boils down to the length of stay and purpose. Individuals are held in jails to await trial, and to serve a short sentence after conviction. They are most typically operated by local law enforcement and government agencies. Prisons, operated by state governments and the Federal Bureau of Prisons, hold individuals convicted of felonies for longer periods.

side students, we were allowed to include both female and male inside students, which was a very unique and unprecedented inside student population. The inside students were not offered college credits for the course, but they were given an incentive of good time<sup>4</sup> for each class session they attended (12 days maximum). While the desired number of students would be around 30, equally distributed among inside and outside, we experienced attrition for both groups for different reasons ranging from illness to early release, reducing the class size over the course of the semester. While challenging at times none of these events was detrimental to the overall success of the course.

### **Class structure**

True to the Inside Out model we always started class in a large circle, with inside and outside students alternating seats<sup>5</sup>. During this circle time, everyone is welcomed and has the opportunity to share something from the previous week if they wish to do so. According to Pollack (2014), these circles are one of the most powerful pedagogical tools an Inside Out class offers. To facilitate this activity in the first meeting, we told students ahead of time to closely observe their physical social environment and the news leading up to our class, in order to share something criminal justice related that was new or interesting to them. By mid-semester, students seemed to get the hang of this recurring exercise and did not need the prompts anymore. We also gave an overview of what students could expect in the session. In the first few weeks, we continued with icebreakers to decrease the palpable tension and tentativeness in the room and give students the opportunity to get to know each other beyond the label of inside and outside. In the initial large circle, we would start a discussion about the reflection assignment and segue into the topic and assigned readings. We incorporated a range of small group activities and exercises, so there was considerable movement and interaction throughout the three-hour class. Class ended again in a large circle, with final reflections and clarification on homework and reading assignments.

### **Conclusion**

Looking back at the process of implementing this course, several factors integral to Inside Out proved very significant for a positive and meaningful experience for all involved. For example, as recommended by the model, we held separate orientation meetings with each group. In addition to general introductions, the initial meeting provided an opportunity for students to ask questions and voice fears or concerns, and for us to address them. It was imperative to set and repeatedly clarify strict rules at the outset, as they differed quite substantially from a regular on-campus class and any disregard for these rules, however small it may have seemed to the individual student, could have resulted in the immediate termination of the class and program. Still we experienced violations of those rules, most of which involved the dress code and arriving late to class. As the semester progressed and students felt more at ease with being in a jail and their classmates, they also became more relaxed with regard to abiding by the rules. We were fortunate to have a very good working relationship with our liaison at the Sheriff's Office and the deputies sitting in on our meetings, so that in our case these violations did not have negative consequences for the entire class. There were, however, instances when a student was told to leave and subsequently excluded from the course.

The first meeting with the inside students was just as important. While a recap of the facility rules might seem superfluous and most of our inside student had a special status (work release) that allowed daily contact with community residents, it was nevertheless critical to provide the same information to all students to signal that all were treated as peers. An additional function of this first meeting with the inside students was to address concerns of being studied and stereotyped, as well as fears of not being able to keep up with the class due to varying levels of education.

We also learned that the very first combined meeting set the structure for much of the semester. Keeping the general organization of each session consistent produced a positive and reassuring effect on the students in that unfamiliar space. Additionally, even though we knew that students had very different educational backgrounds, we quickly saw the importance of 'meeting the students where they were' in terms of academic abilities, and of providing detailed and constructive feedback to the assignments. In order for a class to flourish

<sup>4</sup> Credit for sentence reduction

<sup>5</sup> Because we had both female and male inside students in our classes who were initially not allowed to sit together by request of the Sheriff's Office, we had to inconspicuously assign seats so that would not be an obvious issue.

ish in this setting, above all flexibility proved to be crucial, because in the end the only real control we had was over the structure and organization of our weekly lessons and discussions. However, despite the initial roadblocks to getting the course off the ground and skepticism from the correctional administration, the course received such positive feedback that we were asked back the next semester.

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**PRACTITIONER PAPER**

## **Behold, she stands at the door: Reentry, black women, and the black church**

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**Abstract:** This paper examines the African American church's response to the special problems of African American women who reenter the community post-incarceration. The first portion of the paper examines the impact of criminal justice policies on women of color and the attending problems of reentry which resulted. It then surveys the black church's response to returning citizens, especially women. It concludes by proposing shifts in perspectives and theologies which create barriers to successful reintegration into the community at large, and the church in particular. The intended audience is individuals and faith communities who seek to work effectively with returning women

**Key words:** *reentry; women; black church*

### **Introduction**

According to a report published annually by the Prison Policy Initiative, a Massachusetts –based non-profit think tank whose research focuses on the harms of mass incarceration, 636,000 people walk out of prison every year in the United States (Wagner and Rabuy, 2016). Moreover, there are 820,000 people on parole and a whopping 3.6 million on probation (Wagner and Rabuy, 2016). African Americans are overrepresented among those who are both incarcerated, and therefore among those who are reentering society (Brown, 2010).

Like their male counterparts, African American women are also overrepresented among the incarcerated population (Brown, 2010). According to Keri Day, “poor women of color are the fastest-growing group being disenfranchised by public policies that support [the] prison industrial complex” (2012). Over half the female prison population is African American (Day, 2012). Challenges African American women face prior to incarceration, such as unemployment, poverty, addiction, and abuse, which in some cases led to the incarceration, often linger and are also compounded by the incarceration itself. Moreover, policies that deny voting rights and public assistance, limit housing options, and reduce access to educational loans further complicate reentry, not to mention thwart some black women's ability to reunite with their children and other family members (Brown, 2010; Day, 2012).

According to the late Rev. Eugene Williams, III, the Los Angeles-based pastor activist who led the Regional Congregations and Neighborhood Organizations, African American churches are viewed as “first responders” in any crisis, and therefore play a significant role in reentry because the incarcerated and their families often turn to congregations for support and services (2008). Yet, how does the African American church respond?

The late United Church of Christ minister and criminal justice activist, Lonnie McLeod Jr., posited that returning to life on the outside is a much more complex process than most congregations understand to effectively minister to returning citizens (2011). This begs another question: How should black churches respond if our work in this area is to be effective? The following pages will further expound upon the problem of reentry, focusing on the special challenges of African American women, and will discuss the role of the black church in addressing the “unfinished business” of the successful reintegration of returning citizens who are black women.



### Mass Incarceration and African American Women

Michelle Alexander's seminal tome, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Color-blindness*, focused the world's attention on the problem of mass incarceration in the United States, especially among poor black and brown people, and has led to a movement to address problems in the U.S. criminal justice system (2010). Alexander's work connects policies and practices present since slavery, especially those which deny the franchise, as signs of a continued systemic structure of racial bias. She writes, while "it is no longer permissible to use race explicitly, as a justification for discrimination, exclusion, and social contempt. [...] We use our criminal justice system to label people of color 'criminals' and then engage in practices we supposedly left behind." Alexander continues, "Today it is perfectly legal to discriminate against African Americans. Once you're labeled a felon, the old forms of discrimination [...] are suddenly legal" (2010).

The historical roots of the overrepresentation and inequality in the criminal justice system of especially African Americans can be traced to immediately after the end of the slavery. Another seminal book, *Slavery by Another Name: The Re-enslavement of Black Americans from the Civil War to World War II* by Douglas Blackmon traces policies and legal practices which had the effect of re-enslaving former slaves (2008). As an example, some former slaves were subjected to involuntary servitude for discriminatory application of laws for minor infractions which normally carried fines, but resulted in incarceration if fines could not be paid. Because these practices were widespread and continued long after Emancipation, Douglass does not date the end of actual slavery until well into the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

While historical images of African American men on chain gangs abound, African American women were also victims of re-enslavement. After 1870, black women comprised the overwhelming majority of inmates in prison camps (Cudjoe and Barringer, 2002). In many cases, sentences were meted out in a racially biased manner. For example, black women served hard time in the fields for stealing property, while their white counterparts convicted of murder served as domestics (Cudjoe and Barringer, 2002). A recent treatise, *Chained in Silence: Black Women and Convict Labor in the New South*, chronicles the experiences of Georgia's most hidden workforce near the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and thereafter - "black convict women" (LeFlouria, 2015). These women provided free labor throughout the state of Georgia from coal mines, railroad camps, and Atlanta's brickyards, where they were subject to terror and violence (LeFlouria, 2015). Suffice it to say that the re-enslavement through racialized incarceration was experienced by both men and women.

Fast forward to the post-Civil Right era, a second wave of policies which impacted the overrepresentation of African Americans in the criminal justice system is typically traced to the War on Drugs during the reign of President Ronald Reagan, which received vast support from politicians, Democratic and Republican, as well as from the public at large (Brown, 2010). At least one set of researchers traces the explosion of incarceration to right-leaning rhetoric which linked street crime to civil rights protests, embracing a law and order, tough on crime approach (Western and Wildeman, 2009). This so-called war and its attending rhetoric resulted in mandatory minimal sentences, enhanced sentencing for repeat offenders, and increased construction of prison facilities (Western and Wildeman, 2009). Like every war, the War on Drugs had an enemy; in this case, it was blacks and Latinos (Brown, 2010).

One policy which had a particular impact on the incarceration rates among African American was the disparate treatment between powder and crack cocaine possession which became law in 1986. While most authorities as late as 2006 estimated that more than 66% of those who use crack cocaine were white, 82% of those convicted and sentenced under federal crack cocaine laws were African American (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, n.d.). This war would imprison a "generation of African American men and women at alarming rates" (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, n.d.). By 2001, African American males in prison numbered 3,161 per 100,000 African American men, compared to 487 white prisoners per 100,000 white men. For African American women, the rate was 149 per 100,000; for white women 50 per 100,000 (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, n.d.). Today, while the rate of incarceration has gone down to 113 per 100,000, African American women continue to be disproportionately represented in the overall prison population at 22% (Carson, 2015).

Tough on crime policies continue to negatively impact men and women after they are released from prison, due largely to federal policies enacted during the administration of President Clinton. In August 1996,

President Clinton made good on his campaign promise to reform welfare by signing into law, *The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act* (PRWORA) which among other things limits the number of years a family can receive aid and enacted work requirements for aid recipients (H.R. 3734, 1996). A significant provision that received far less attention is the denial of federal benefits (cash and food stamps) to individuals convicted in state or federal court of felony drug offenses (Mauer and McCalmont, 2013). For the 15 year period between 1996-2011, it is estimated that there were 180,100 women affected by the law denying Temporary Aid to Needy Families (TNAF) benefits (Mauer and McCalmont, 2013). Due to the disparate impact of the so-called War on Drugs on women of color, African American and Latinas are disproportionately represented among those impacted by the lifetime TNAF ban (Mauer and McCalmont, 2013).

In its most recent legislative session (Southern Center for Human Rights, 2016), the state of Georgia, which has the second largest number of women impacted by the TNAF ban (over 56,000), has lifted the lifetime ban on receiving food stamps on people with drug convictions. However, TNAF bans remain in place in Georgia and 12 other states; partial bans remain in another 24 states (Mauer and McCalmont, 2013).

Besides policies, other factors adversely impact women who are involved with the criminal justice system - factors which not only lead to incarceration itself but also complicate reentry. For example, the Bureau of Justice Statistics estimates that incarcerated women are more likely to be HIV-positive; to have suffered domestic violence, physical and sexual abuse; and to have a higher rate of mental illness and reported higher incidences of drug use than their male counterparts (Carson, 2015). These challenges are compounded by racial disparities in health problems, particularly HIV-status. Moreover, black women are also more likely to have been the sole caretaker of their children prior to incarceration; therefore they reenter with the responsibility of having to provide food and shelter for children, or in some cases having to fight to regain custody of them from relatives or the foster care system (Brown, 2010). In some instances, these women have had their parental rights stripped away altogether, a result of the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 which stiffened timelines for terminating parental rights of children in foster care (H.R. 867, 1997).

In spite of the fact that women experience a host of factors which may lead to imprisonment and complicate reentry (e.g., history of sexual and physical abuse, substance abuse and mental illness, and economic disadvantage), most tools that assess women's needs during and after incarceration do not consider these special circumstances. Moreover, the need to reestablish family relationships, which is shown to be as essential as the need for employment, and the effects of trauma and violence on the lives of women offenders are often ignored. Failure to consider gendered circumstances results in "over-classifying the risk level of women offenders. In other words, the highest risk women are almost inevitably lower risk than the highest risk men" (Berman, 2005). This underestimating of the needs of women post-incarceration may result in increased recidivism among women, especially among those who are unable to find community support. For black women, this may be exacerbated because, according to Anthony C. Thompson, author of *Releasing Prisoners, Redeeming Communities: Re-entry, Race and Politics*, community support may be particularly lacking for African American women whose incarceration is viewed as their having acted outside of accepted gender and race roles (2008).

### **The Black Church as "First Responders"**

*Then Peter came to himself and said, "Now I am sure that the Lord has sent his angel and rescued me from the hands of Herod and from all that the Jewish people were expecting." As soon as he realized this, he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John whose other name was Mark, where many had gathered and were praying. When he knocked on the outer gate, a maid named Rhoda came to answer. On recognizing Peter's voice, she was so overjoyed that, instead of opening the gate, she ran in and announced that Peter was standing at the gate. They said to her, "You are out of your mind!" But she insisted that it was so. They said, "It is an angel." Meanwhile Peter continued knocking; and when they opened the gate they saw him and were amazed. (Acts 12: 11-16 New Revised Standard Version)*

The above episode from the biblical text is an example of the early church's response to a person who returns to society after being incarcerated. The Apostle Peter had been jailed by the government for preaching the Gospel. Peter went almost immediately to the church after his release. The church's response is noteworthy.

thy. First, instead of opening the door, Rhoda left him standing there while she went to tell the others. Granted, she was excited, but Rhoda still didn't open the door. When Rhoda went to tell the others, they said to her, this servant girl, "You must be crazy." They ostracized and labeled her. Interestingly enough, the church had been praying for Peter's release according to Acts 12:5, yet when Rhoda told them that Peter was at the gate, the church folk didn't believe her. Poor and female, and perhaps accustomed to being disbelieved, Rhoda insisted that she saw what she saw. The church, which had been in the middle of prayer meeting, still didn't believe her. Meanwhile, Peter continued to knock, while the church folk, moved from praying to engaging in what Dr. King called the "paralysis of analysis," wondering whether what Rhoda had really seen at the door was an angel. Peter kept knocking, and finally they stopped talking and opened the gate.

What if Peter had stopped knocking? Moreover, what if instead of Peter, the fearless leader of the early Christians jailed for the sake of Christ, it was Rhoda or someone like her-- young, poor, female and jailed for selling drugs to feed her children-- standing there? If Rhoda had been standing on the other side of the gate, the same Rhoda whom church folk had already accused of being "out of her mind," would she have been allowed in?

E. Eric Lincoln wrote, "The Black Church has always stood as a *symbol* of freedom, even when the exigencies of the times made it the "Negro" Church. But it was never completely unanimous on the issue of whether it must not also be the *instrument* of freedom - a dilemma which shadows it to this day" (1974). Is the church an instrument of freedom for the African American women who are reentering society after prison? Or are reentering black women a part of the "unfinished business" of the black church? The next section of the paper will address the black church's response to reentry in general, and of women in particular, as well as suggest strategies and rituals to better respond to black women who return from prison.

Traditional prison ministry consists of church folk going into the prisons for the purpose of "saving the lost." The ministry team enters, reads a few scriptures, sings a few songs, and prays a prayer, which invariably seeks to rehabilitate the soul of the "prisoner," so that he or she might become "saved, sanctified and filled with the Holy Ghost," and as a result "go and sin no more." After the benediction, the ministry team gets in cars gloating at the fact that they've saved another soul for Christ, take the long drive back and return to comfortable homes, cushy jobs, and circumstances, until the next month or year when they return to repeat the Hallelujah feel good moment. Rarely do we think about where the incarcerated person whom we've led to Christ will live or work once she's released. That's not our area. God will make a way. As long as she goes to heaven when she dies, how she lives isn't our concern. Or, during Christmas time, we take a name from the angel tree of a child whose mother is locked up, go buy a toy truck from Wal-Mart, wrap it really nicely and take it to the church. We may never give a second thought to the child's mother, whether she gets a chance to visit with her child whom she parented alone before getting locked up. We seldom wonder if upon her release she will be able to purchase food for her children, let alone purchase the shiny red truck, which required minimal sacrifice for us.

Traditional prison ministries serve an important function. Research suggests that religious beliefs do reduce crime and recidivism among adult prisoners (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2004), so evangelism components are useful. It is also important that the vulnerable population of children whose parents are incarcerated are given hope for another day through various acts of charity. However, traditional prison ministries which limit their work to inside the walls of the prison do not provide for the full breadth of the needs of the incarcerated. Moreover, these acts of evangelism and charity do not answer questions about what happens when these citizens return to the community.

"The predominant model of going in to pray and sing hymns is not enough," says Rev. Madeline McClenney-Sadler, founder of the Exodus Foundation, a Charlotte-based faith-based organization which offers trained mentors to returning citizens. "It reflects our own standoffishness and fear [of this population] that causes us to limit our ministry to the safety of prison. True ministry requires a greater level of comfort with the risks involved" (Newsome, 2012).

Given the growing population of returning citizens, there is a movement underway to expand the role of congregations in the quest to help with reintegration. One such program is Healing Communities, whose mission is building "relationships of healing, redemption and reconciliation in families and communities im-



pacted by incarceration” (n.d.). Healing Communities does not provide direct services, but rather “challenges congregations to become Stations of Hope for those persons affected by the criminal justice system.” The organization trains faith communities in the following:

- walk with the returning citizens (connect returning citizens to resources that will help set attainable goals)
- help them connect with their faith (provide spiritual support)
- open their hearts to them (foster positive relationships)
- embrace them (extend open and affirming fellowship)
- provide understanding (collaboration with family and friends to rebuild relationships)
- advocate for political change on a local, state, and federal level.

Healing Communities embraces a restoration justice model, and has as a primary aim to remove the stigma, suspicion and shame which often attends returning citizens. Its focus is not on programs, but on perspective. One researcher notes that of the congregations he studied, many view the most marginalized families and individuals - ones least likely to feel welcome in church - as symptomatic of the evil in the world that is to be avoided (McRoberts, 2002). So the Healing Communities approach is a much-needed one. The Healing Communities model also gives faith communities the agency to develop programs based on the needs of their own communities.<sup>1</sup>

There are a number of “high profile” congregations that have done work in the area of reentry. For example, the Potter’s House ministry led by Bishop T. D. Jakes has as one of its affiliates The Texas Offender Reentry Initiative. Founded in 2004, TORI is a 12-month intensive program which offers support in six areas: employment, housing, education, family reunification, health care, and spiritual guidance (Archer, 2015). The program is offered to men and women, and contains components which would support their successful reentry, such as family reunification and health care treatment which includes HIV/AIDS. TORI’s literature and news stories feature women who have matriculated through the program. Since its inception, TORI has served over 10,000 returning citizens (Youngman, 2015).

Another congregation, Baltimore’s Empowerment Temple, led by Jamal Harrison Bryant, was asked to forgo new Easter outfits three years ago in order to give new or gently new clothing to returning citizens (Kaltenbach, 2013). “We want to help our brothers and sisters who have been newly released make a fresh start and put their best foot forward,” said Bryant (qtd. in Kaltenbach, 2013). While only a symbolic gesture, this act indicates that the needs of the growing number of returning citizens are on the radar of some black congregations.

There are a number of organizations that focus exclusively on women’s reentry. An Atlanta ministry, Alpha and Omega Society, an organization affiliated with the North Georgia Conference of the United Methodist Church, has as its mission “to facilitate the successful transition of women and girls from the criminal justice system back into the society by mobilizing community, service and faith-based organizations” (Alpha and Omega Society, 2015). The organization’s Women in Transition program provides mentoring, personal development, skills building and advocacy.

Release to Reunion is a local nonprofit which helps women who have lost custody of their children gain jobs skills, steady employment and housing to position them to reunite with their children. The organization’s founder, Marjanet Wilson, who provides program participants with computer keyboarding skills and office management training which they use in a virtual office environment, says she’s reached out to congregations for assistance but some have been reluctant to assist women with a drug history (M. Wilson, personal communication, April 17, 2016). Rosie Palmer, founding director of Connecting Communities, which provides a host of services to women --many of whom are returning citizens --says churches have supported her clients through food and clothing distributions, but she too notes that churches often judge the choices of the formerly incarcerated, and often do not want to provide help beyond evangelism (R.T. Palmer, personal communication, April 17, 2016).

State governments have begun to seek out congregations as partners in reentry, providing for example

<sup>1</sup>The writer has been trained in the Healing Communities process, so these thoughts represent my reflections on the program.

mentorship and other direct services. The state of Georgia Office for Reentry Services has adopted the Healing Communities model and recently launched a faith-based mentoring program called “I Choose Support.” While faith communities are an important partner in assisting returning citizens in reintegrating, government should not abdicate its role in supporting returning citizens. Moreover, churches should be careful about abdicating their prophetic role by getting too cozy with the government.

The church must also advocate for criminal justice reform in order to counteract the policies which led to mass incarceration which disproportionately impacted African American women, children and men. For example, *The New Jim Crow* author Michelle Alexander advocates for the decriminalization of marijuana, noting that there many young black and brown men and women whose lives have been ruined over possession of a little bit of weed (2010). Policy is shifting in this area. Many states have decriminalized and even legalized recreational use of marijuana. As a result, what landed many young black and brown bodies in jail is the equivalent of a parking ticket or poses no penalty for others. As a moral matter, while the black church may not be inclined to openly support legalizing drugs, the church may consider “standing down” and not thwart this current policy trend (unlike what many congregations did just with respect to condom distribution and needle exchanges at the beginning of the AIDS epidemic). Moreover, churches can use the fact that the policy has shifted to advocate for the release or to have expunged the records of those whose act has now been decriminalized.

There are a number of signs of hope in the area of criminal justice reform, including movement to Ban the Box, which removes questions about criminal history from initial job applications. Several states and municipalities including Georgia and the city of Atlanta have adapted Ban the Box policies (Rodriguez and Avery, 2016). The Federal government has also instituted a ban the box policy, as have leading corporations such as Target, Wal-Mart, Google and Starbucks (The White House, 2016). Also, the state of Virginia recently lifted its lifetime disfranchisement of convicted felons (“Secretary of the Commonwealth Kelly Thomasson,” 2016).

The black church, especially, with its rich prophetic heritage, must continue to be an instrument of freedom for returning citizens in these and other ways. Black churches can encourage members to support businesses which have banned the box. The church must hold the government’s feet to the fire when it comes to the removal of policies which create barriers to successful reentry, such as those mentioned earlier. If the systemic causes of incarceration are not addressed, like poverty, inadequate health care, abuse, and if barriers to reentry such as employment opportunities, housing limitations, disenfranchisement are not lifted, returning citizens will not have the necessary support for successful reintegration.

### **The Church and Returning Black Women**

Given the special circumstances that complicate the reentry of African American women, what else must the church do to support women who return to the community after prison? Because the common mental picture in the black church of an incarcerated person is male, there may not be a level of familiarity with the special needs of returning citizens who are black women. Therefore, there needs to be some education around issues affecting women’s successful reentry. In addition, ministry to returning women must contain particular aspects of pastoral care, which provide space for grief, a sense of agency, and avoids patriarchal theologies which are not empowering to women, and may be particularly damaging to reentering women.

Incarceration is replete with losses - loss of life, loss of liberty, economic, relational and emotional losses. As with most any loss, those experiencing incarceration - the incarcerated person him or herself, her or his family and the community- suffer “sorrow and grief,” in this case, “for both the victim of the crime and their [own] kin...” (Family Freedom Kit, 2008). However, because the source of the loss is incarceration, the grief that often attends it is coupled with “shame and embarrassment” (Family Freedom Kit, 2008). Dr. Kenneth Doka has explored the concept of “disenfranchised grief” which he defines as grief that develops from a loss that “cannot be socially sanctioned, openly acknowledged or publicly mourned” (1990). Returning citizens may not have had the opportunity to mourn the losses that they sustained prior to being imprisoned. Coming out into the community may serve to reopen the wounds from those losses. If a woman has lost her children to the foster care system, a feeling of loss continues post-incarceration. Moreover, an added loss might be losing a sense of community developed while incarcerated.

The black church must provide space for women to authentically mourn their losses. It is situated to do so since all churches have developed rituals around death and dying. Indeed, African American religious traditions which began prior to the formal institutions grew out of the ritual assistance given on slave plantations around issue related to life events, including death and dying (Mintz and Price, 1992). Consequently, the black church is particularly well situated to support reentering black women in moving through the grief and losses suffered.

The black church must also provide support to empower African American women to develop a sense of agency and independence. Harold Dean Trulear, Ph.D., Associate Professor at Howard University Divinity School, national director of Healing Communities and himself a returning citizen stated anecdotally during a Healing Communities training that whenever he runs into a woman who is a returning citizen his first question is, “What’s his name?” Meaning, what man did you get caught up with that led to your incarceration? (Trulear, 2015). There is some research to support Trulear’s presupposition: One of the casualties of mandatory minimums was low-level drug dealers, many of whom were young women intimately involved with higher level male drug dealers (Levy-Pounds, 2006). Trulear opines that women getting hooked up with wrong men may be due, in part, to the church’s ostracizing unmarried women as being less valuable, less whole. For some, these choices, made out of the desire to conform to religious teachings, may ultimately have led to prison.

Also, returning women have been in an environment where much of their agency has been removed. They are told what to wear, when to rise, given limited choices in everyday decision-making. Moreover, even post-incarceration, returning women may be under court supervision as parolees or probationers, which means they still do not have freedoms which provide some sense of agency and independence. The church, therefore, can be one space where returning women are empowered. This empowerment must also include space for women, who are often seen through the lens of their deficiencies, to exercise their God-given gifts and abilities.

Finally, because returning women have disproportionately experienced the trauma of sexual abuse and domestic violence, the church, especially during the preaching moment, must be careful how it handles biblical texts in which women are victims of violence. How will the story of the Levite’s concubine, where two women are offered to strangers for sex, ring in the ears of a woman who has been raped or trafficked? Or how does a biblical story of Jephthah’s daughter, offered as a sacrifice by her father, ring in the ears of a child who’s been molested or has suffered the loss of her own child?<sup>2</sup> Even innocuous stories like the Proverbs 31 woman or those stories where a woman’s most treasured function is her ability to bear children (sons especially) may bring up for returning women a sense of shame, guilt or loss. If these texts are not handled with care in the presence of returning women, who have experienced for themselves the wounds therein, and especially if the texts aren’t challenged, the church risks losing the body and souls of these women. A woman who has been through hell doesn’t want a God-experience that reminds her of the hell she’s been through, and even sanctions it.

In conclusion, effective ministry to black women who are returning from prison is a blessed opportunity for the black church to cast a wider net, to embrace those whom it tends to “other,” and to be a voice for the voiceless through advocating systemic societal changes which hinder the successful reintegration of the formerly incarcerated. Ministry to returning women also provides an opportunity to move forward a theological framing that is healing and empowering for all African American women. Lessons of courage, resilience, and ingenuity abound in the lives of returning women. The black church which historically has exhibited similar courage, resilience and ingenuity is a ripe space for all people, but especially those who have been marginalized by their race, gender, and the experience of incarceration, to bear witness to that which has made the black church strong.

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<sup>2</sup> See Tribble (1984) for a broader discussion of these and other violent biblical texts.

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